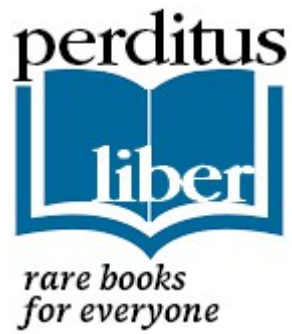


THE LORD OF LIFE



NEIL BELL



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The Lord Of Life

by

Neil Bell

Published 1933

THE LORD OF LIFE

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BY
NEIL BELL



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1933

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TO
BILL

*Had I a thousand lives to live
And you a thousand lives to give
I'd barter mine to hold in fee
One that your love had given me.*

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BOOK ONE

CHANCE

CHAPTER I

UNTRUMPETED ARRIVAL OF SIDNEY LARKINS

I

A SLIM steel blade hovering within an inch of a woman's breast is a legitimately exciting spectacle. That the bosom is covered with cheap gingham and the blade held by a fat shortish man with a red perspiring face should in no degree detract from the sensuous thrill of the impending drama. A casual passer-by peering in through the open door of Larkins's, the ham and beef shop at the corner of Franklin Road, Medbury, on a certain bright hot July morning might well then have paused with pardonably excited anticipation. And a disappointment equally pardonable may be permitted the hypothetical passer-by on hearing the words accompanying that seemingly murderous thrust. "There's nothing better and more wholesome, Mrs. Baker, on a hot day like this than corned beef cut thin and a nice bit of green stuff."

"Then I'll take half-a-pound, Mr. Larkins, but not *too* thin or the children bolt it."

The long slim blade removed itself from its misleading position and for some seconds was engaged upon its true if less exciting duties. "A quarter of ham to go with it, now?"

"What's the ham's morning?"

"One and seven. Tongue one and ten."

"Can't run to that on a Thursday."

"Brawn's only a shilling. How about a quarter? Filling and wholesome. Made only last night, so you can take it from me it's fresh."

"I'll have a quarter."

There was a sudden tap at the glass panel of the door which led into the small sitting-room and a woman's face, surmounted

by a vast, white, starched erection, was seen pressing against the glass. Mr. Larkins dropped a last morsel of brawn onto the hesitating scale-pan and, knife in hand, hurried to the door, opened it, intruded his head, and for a

few moments conducted a hoarsely whispered conversation with the intimidating figure in the sitting-room.

He returned presently to the counter, laid down the knife beside the scales, whipped off the brawn and, as he wrapped it up, said with a faint grin, "Boy's just born, Mrs. Baker. Both doing well, so *she* says," with a jerk of his head towards the sitting-room.

"Congratulations, Mr. Larkins!"

"Thank *you*, Mrs. Baker. Not so sure," affecting a sudden gloom, "it's anything to be jolly about. Makes five boys he does, and two girls is seven. Seven's a big bunch these days and all under ten. Good job I'm strong and hearty."

"And a nice little business."

"Ah. It's what you make it."

"Families aren't what they used to be. We was thirteen and nobody thought anything of *that*. Why——"

"You're right; but times ain't what they were. And 'tanyrate seven's more'n we meant to have. 'We'll just have a pigeon pair, old girl,' I said to the missis before the first came along — 'first a girl and then a boy.' 'That's right,' she said; and that's what we meant. On'y the first was a boy and the girl come after. 'We'll pack up now, old girl,' I said when young Milly was born the year a'ter John. And so we meant to, as I'm telling you. And here's number seven."

"Ah, well, it's nature. 'S no good going against nature and no good worrying. After my first, and a bad time I had with him, I can tell you — three days and nights and then they had to use the instruments. And no chloroform, neither. After my first I said, 'No more of this. I'd sooner die. And if George don't see eye to eye, why, then, he don't touch me again.' But, God bless you! I'd forgotten most of it by the time I'd been up and about a week. Had five since then and as far as I can see, likely to have another five. Not blaming George. No. It's

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nature, and when nature comes on you there you are, and it's no use talking. Well, I must be off. Nothing the matter with his lungs," as a thin cry from above the shop suddenly swelled piercingly. "Hope things'll go along all right. If there's anything I can do just send your Johnny over for me. I'll send some flowers over as soon as my Elsie comes in from school.

Garden's fair choked with 'em. Well, good-morning, Mr. Larkins. Don't forget if there's anything."

Left to himself, Bert Larkins leaned against the loaded shelves at the back of the counter and running his thumb slowly up and down the edge of the long slim knife-blade, surrendered himself to his thoughts. Presently his lips pursed and emitted the faintly whistled notes of one of the few tunes he could manage with fair assurance, that of hymn number 254 in the Church Hymnal. It occurred to him abruptly that it was some years since he had heard it sung.

The crying note of the new babe had now ceased, but there was a noise of considerable hurried movement overhead. He crossed over to the glass-panelled door and had half-opened it when a fresh customer, Fred Paston, a boilermaker in the Central Railway works, recalled him to the counter.

"Morning, Bert. How's things?"

"How do, Fred. So so. New nipper just arrived so we're in a bit of a muddle. Week afore his time and dropped like a hot coal."

"Missis not bad?"

"No. All Sir Garnet. Still, you know what——"

"You're right. 'Ell of a time I had with my last. Or the old girl did. Both of us. Always sick I am when the old woman's confined. A bit queer that."

"Sick?"

"Yers. Proper sick. Spew my heart up. And right off my grub. An' my pipe. On'y thing that does me any good is a pint of good old Mann Crorsmann's. Could do one a bit of no good at this bleedin' minute. What d'y'say, Bert?"

"No. Can't leave the shop. See you in *The Bird* to-night and we'll wet his head. But not now. Want anything?"

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"Not 'alf I don't. Old woman won't 'alf be praying by the time I get home. Asked me to call here on my way home and bring half o' German sausage and half o' corned beef for dinner. Blimey!" anxiously. "Clock's fast, ain't it?"

"Not much."

"Quarter to one! Cripes! I lay the kids've been home from school half-an-hour and shouting for their grub. Cut it off quick, mate. Quarter to one! Old girl'll swear I've been in *The Bird*. Chuck us it over. How much? Well,

good luck to the new nipper, Bert. See you in *The Bird* to-night. About nine? Righto. So long.”

“And if you haven’t been in *The Bird*, old son,” commented Bert judiciously, as the door slammed to behind his friend, “may I never get outside another pint m’self. Wish old Mother Prowse’d come down and see to the shop for five minutes so I could slip up and see the missis. And the nipper too, o’ course. Can’t say I’m worrying much about *him*. Getting a bit stale, number seven is. Blimey! shan’t forget in a hurry when young John was born. Scared out of my blinkin’ wits I was. An’ guts all anyhow. Worse’n four Beecham’s. Strewth! Here comes old Saunders. Lay he wants ham and tongue cut thin and,” mimicking, “not more fat than you can help, Mr. Larkins. Good-morning, sir,” as the Headmaster of St. Mark’s National School entered hurriedly.

“Good-morning, Mr. Larkins. Fine weather. How’s the tongue this morning? Fresh?”

“Fresh as a new-born babe, sir. On’y cooked last night and just out of the ice-store. Half a pound?”

“Well, I think so. Yes. And the same of ham, shall we say. And not——”

“Too much fat, sir. Now for my part give me the fat of ham and anyone can have the lean. Takes all sorts to make a world. Jack Spratt and all that. Ten ounces. How’s that, sir?”

“Well, all right. Family quite well, Mr. Larkins?”

“All those I’ve seen, sir,” grinning, “and I *hear* the one I *haven’t* seen is doing well; so it’s all Sir Garnet.”

“Yes, of course,” mildly puzzled.

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“New nipper just arrived,” explained Mr. Larkins. “Nurse just come downstairs to tell me.”

“Splendid! Let me congratulate you. Mrs. Larkins doing well?”

“*Both* doing fine,” heartily.

“Splendid! Quite a nice family circle now, eh?”

“You’re right, sir,” dubiously. “Seven it is — five boys and two girls.”

“A real quiverful.”

“You’re right, sir. P’raps a bit too full. Still, mustn’t grumble, I suppose.”

“The country wants all the strong healthy babies it can get. Everything depends upon that — everything. To give a fine brood of youngsters to

one's country is an act of real patriotism. There is no other work so important, so inspiring, so satisfying. Five boys now, eh? Splendid. Hope this new little lad will be as good a boy as — er — er — John, yes, John. Standard Three, I believe?"

"Goes *up* into three after the holidays, sir, he says."

"Yes, quite right. Quite."

"Breaks up this week, he tells me."

"On Thursday. Yes. And very glad *I* shall be to get away for a few days."

"Five weeks you get, sir, isn't it?"

"Four, Mr. Larkins, four. And a few odd days. Yes. Most welcome. And necessary. How much will that be? One moment. I think I'll have a small bottle of gherkins. Yes, that one will do. Thank you. Well, good-morning. Congratulate Mrs. Larkins for me and tell her — er — er — John is a credit to her. *Good-morning.*"

"Forgotten those damned holidays," mused Bert, as the schoolmaster closed the door softly behind him. "Bit unlucky coming just now. Wonder if mother'd keep Alice and Frank and 'Erbie for the month. Hardly like to ask, though. Bit thick on her at her time of life. S'pose Jane won't feel much like dinner. Wonder what the kids are up to in the garden. Time they had some, I reckon. Time old Mother Prowse came down

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and got it. Expects *me* to get it, I lay. Never did know a monthly that wasn't as bleedin' hoity-toity as if she owned the place." Longingly: "I couldn't half neck a pint now." Gloomily: "Some hopes!"

Upstairs, Jane Larkins, flushed and a little drowsy after her ordeal, lay with the new babe asleep beside her in the big bed and watched with listless eyes the bustling movements of Mrs. Prowse. "He's a rare little 'un," she said sleepily. "Littlest of the lot. Proper reckling."

"None the worse for that, my dear," commented Mrs. Prowse professionally. "He's fine and hearty and got everything he *ought* to have and nothing he oughtn't. Six pounds isn't too bad and he'll soon suck up." She gathered together a heap of soiled articles and began to roll them up into sheets of newspaper. "Good job you never have no trouble with your milk. Half these young chits of girls these days can't. So they say. Won't's more like it. Spoil their figgers. Silly little fools. *Makes* their figgers. But it's no good talking to 'em. *They* know. Well, you've got seven now, Mrs. Larkins. Let's hope that's the lot."

“Hope so,” indifferently.

“How old are you, my dear? Thirty-five, isn’t it?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“You don’t look it. Well, couple of years ought to see you safe—if you’re lucky. ’Though it’s just about then many a woman gets caught. Only had a case last month, no, May it was, end of May — Mrs. Foster, *you* know. Foster the baker in Duncan Road. Little thin consumptive man. That’s right. Well, Mrs. Foster’s three children all grown up. Last one born when she was twenty-one. And only in May last, she has her fourth. And she’s forty-three. No, you never know. Sleepy, aren’t you? Well, I’ll just get you a nice cup of hot tea and then you can have a nap.”

“No tea, thanks. Don’t fancy it. I’ll just have a sleep.”

“Now that’ll do. No nonsense. You’ll have a cup of hot tea first. And while I’m making it I’ll send Mr. Larkins up. Like to see him now?”

“All right,” moving her body restlessly in the hot bed. “Will

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you get the children their dinner? They’re in the garden. Mr. Larkins’ll get his own.”

“Hello, old dear! How goes it?” inquired Bert a few moments later, sitting down on the bed and bending over to kiss his wife.

“All right, Bert. Bit tired. Mind the baby.”

“Blimey! What a little runt. Get him in a pint pot. He’s all right, I suppose?”

She nodded. “He’s all right, Bert. So Mrs. Prowse says. Bit small, but,” smiling a trifle wanly, “all there anyways. Not had your dinner yet, have you?”

“Not yet, old dear. Cut m’self a beef sandwidge, I think, and slip across to *The Bird* for a pint with it. That be all right?”

“That’s right, Bert. You won’t be long? If John thinks you’re not coming back he won’t go to school. And then Milly and George’ll start their tantrums.”

“I’ll not be a brace of shakes, old mate. Back in ten minutes. Wouldn’t like a nice bit o’ brawn and a taste o’ piccalilli, I s’pose?”

“Not hungry. I’m having a cup o’ tea. And a bit of a nap — that’s what I want more’n anything. You won’t be long?” anxiously.

“Ten minutes at the outside, old girl,” bending over to kiss her once more and again forgetting the mite by her side. “All right, *all* right, didn’t

hurt him! Well, so long, old dear. Back in no time. Don't you worry, I'll see young John off to school or I'll know the reason why."

Down in the garden Mrs. Prowse, warm and moist in the hot sunshine, surveyed, with arms akimbo and the critical eye of childlessness, a group of three extravagantly grubby children. John, a plump, sturdy fair-haired boy of eight, Milly, red-haired, freckle-faced, slim and slightly taller than her year-older brother, and George, two years younger, dark, skinny, black-eyed, with a narrow, tapering face and a sharply pointed little nose, and the quick darting movements of a fieldmouse.

"You've a new baby-brother, my dears," she said amiably. "You shall see him after dinner, if mother's awake. Dinner'll

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be ready in ten minutes, so don't go away. And you mustn't make a noise. And give your hands and face a wash before you come in. Milly, my dear, you must wash Georgie. Now, mind, you're not to go away."

She turned and went back into the house and the children stared solemnly after her.

"Is Mum sick?" asked Georgie, preparing to cry.

"No," replied Milly sharply. "Now, Georgie, don't you start crying, or you'll get no afters."

Georgie turned away and, sitting down on the gravel path, began to pour muddy water from a rusty treacle tin into an old tea-pot.

"Is it true, Johnny?" whispered Milly.

"What?"

"We've a born baby?"

"Course it is. I said we'd have one when Mum stopped in bed yesterday. We always have a born baby when Mum's sick."

"She's not sick."

"She is. She's in bed, so she must be."

Milly regarded the gloomy face of her elder brother in silence. A question framed itself in her mind but she did not speak it. She found that she could answer it herself. And so she merely said, "You glad, Johnny?"

"Re you?"

"I don't know. 'Re you?"

"Don't care. You'll have to take him out. Will Mum be in bed long?"

"'Xpect so. She was with 'Erbie. Munce an' munce."

"Don't be silly. She wasn't." Doubtfully, anxiously: "Was she?"

Milly nodded her head pontifically. "She was then. And when Frankie was borned. I remember."

"She wasn't!" angrily.

"She was then. And you'll have to stop in and mind Alice and Frankie and 'Erbie."

"All the holidays?"

"Every day," triumphantly.

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"Well, I shan't, then. And they're at Gran's."

"They won't stop at Gran's."

"Perhaps they will." His face clouding: "Why do we keep having born babies, Mil?"

But Mrs. Prowse's shrill voice calling from the kitchen window saved Milly from having to wrestle with that conundrum.

"Have you washed yourselves?" she asked, turning from the pantry as they clattered in. "Now sit down and don't make all that racket. Milly, mash Georgie's potatoes up and cut up his sausage. Don't spill that mustard, Johnny. Now hurry up. There's some nice cold cherry pie for afters and sec Georgie doesn't swallow the stones. Now do hurry up with you. You'll have the school bell going soon. Pm going upstairs now and mind there's no noise."

"Can't we see the born baby before we go to school?" asked Milly.

Mrs. Prowse turned round at the kitchen door and regarded the children thoughtfully. She seemed about to refuse the request, but suddenly changed her mind. "I'll bring him down for just half a minute," she said, as if bestowing at least a week's holiday.

And a few minutes later, as Milly was sharing out the pie, to the vocal dissatisfaction of her two brothers, Mrs. Prowse re-entered the kitchen with the new babe in her arms. As Milly jumped from her chair and ran towards her, John took the opportunity to rectify her division of the cherry pie by scooping several spoonfuls of cherries from her plate to his own and silencing Georgie's impending protest by giving him a grossly inadequate share of the spoil.

"Don't you want to see your little brother, Johnny?" asked Mrs. Prowse, sharply refusing Milly's request to be allowed to hold him. "Help Georgie down and come here at once."

John obeyed reluctantly and, holding his young brother by the hand, drew near to the bundle in Mrs. Prowse's arms. She stooped towards the two boys. John's cheeks bulged with cherries and Georgie seemed to be having difficulty with a piece of pie-crust which was too big for his mouth.

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"There! Kiss him. That'll do. Now clean up your plates and be off to school. You can come up and see your Mum when you come home again. There! That's your Dad come in. And there's the school bell. Hurry yourselves — do."

As she left the room John gathered all the cherry-stones from the plates and began to stuff them into a dirty cotton bag, ignoring George's appeals for a share.

"You shut up, Georgie! You don't play cherry-gobblers. Not in the infants."

"Yes, we do, Johnny. Give me some. I'll tell Dad." He began to cry and banged his spoon on the table.

"What's all this?" cried their father, pushing open the door suddenly, his face wet and flushed. A much-used briar-pipe was clenched in his teeth and he was breathing rapidly and noisily. "Why ain't you off to school? Now look here," his eyes on John but a gesture of the hand embracing the others, "if you're not out of this in two shakes you'll get a lamming you'll not forget in a hurry. Come on, look slippy!"

"Can't I wash my hands, Dad?" asked Johnny.

"Partic'lar all of a sudden, ain't you? Well, you *can't*. Wash 'em at school. What d'you think I pay rates for? Now hop it, the three of you." As they moved towards the back door he took from his pocket a handful of coppers and with the generosity of relief, or the easier generosity of slight inebriation, he handed them a penny each and, once more bidding them hurry, closed the door behind them and, dropping into an old basket chair, put his feet up on to the clothless table and, relighting his pipe, abandoned himself to the enjoyment of the strong dark shag which always seemed to smoke more sweetly after a pint or two of *The Bird in Hand's* justly celebrated mild-and-bitter.

Presently the grip of his big yellow teeth on the pipe relaxed and it drooped from his mouth. A few minutes later, as his lower jaw sagged open, the pipe slipped slowly down his jacket and thence to the floor, where it lay fuming slightly for a while and then went out. His head fell forward on his

chest. His breathing thickened. He snored intermittently and now and again his legs, resting on the table, jerked spasmodically. And

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at each jerk the old basketwork chair creaked loudly. It was the last remaining one of three that his mother had given him when he had married Jane Milligan and set up housekeeping in the small shop just about twelve years before.

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Bert Larkins had only been in Medbury two years when he had married Jane. He had come from the north of England to look for work in the big prosperous midland town and had brought with him his widowed mother, whose small pension (wrung by law from the employer whose gross negligence had happily widowed her) had to provide for both of them until he obtained a job as cleaner in the big locomotive works of the Central Railway.

Medbury, a country village in the early days of Queen Victoria, had grown with the railway and when Bert came it was a large prosperous town with a population of over a hundred thousand, of whom nearly seven thousand were employed in the C.R. locomotive shops. To these shops Medbury owed much of whatever it possessed of more than local renown, for in them had been built those three famous engines, holders of world speed records — *Admiral Rodney*, *Earl Howe* and *Sir Francis Drake*.

Of the River Sair, which had for hundreds of years flowed by Medbury village, there was nothing now in Medbury itself but a dark and dirty stream shut out of the sunlight by tall warehouses and factories. But beyond the town, where once more the fields began, it had regained something of its wild beauty and ran for twenty fresh green miles between its osiered and willowed banks until it was tamed and subdued to the needs of the Bidchester Canal.

Medbury was distinctly a town of character. With its prosperity it had forgotten its beginnings and if a town may be said to possess a soul, then the soul of Medbury was a hard nut to crack. But, if personification may be stretched a little further, Medbury was more than a hard nut; it was “all there,” acute, “fly,” knowing; it was upright, honest and completely sound

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about the right things; it was proud with a pride that still retained something of the touchy vociferousness of the upstart; it was well-to-do; it was supremely successful; over and above all it was rather blatantly proud of what it had made of itself; feared God, honoured the king, supported the constitution and the things that are; and stood foursquare, against all criticism, for its own views and opinions and actions, right or wrong.

And what Medbury was so were its townsfolk — hard, acute, successful, proud and intolerant of criticism. But just how far Medbury was responsible for its townsfolk or the townsfolk responsible for Medbury, it is impossible to say. But here in any case was Medbury, able and ready to teach the rest of the country how to do things and, as a token of that ability, offering to the envious gaze of the less fortunate beyond its borders amenities of which even London, New York or Berlin might well have been proud.

Its schools were conducted with such efficiency that the names of its sons were not unknown in the highest seats of national scholarship. Its by-laws were models of their kind; its municipal services, if equalled elsewhere, were certainly unsurpassed. It possessed three Anglican churches—St. Mark's, St. John's and St. Matthew's; five nonconformist chapels, Wesleyan, Methodist, Baptist, Unitarian and Plymouth Brethren, and a Roman Catholic cathedral had already begun to tower up amid a forest of scaffolding barely a stone-throw away from the new and resplendent Town Hall. There were a Municipal Library, a Carnegie Library, a Gilbert White Museum, two parks, a recreation ground (with lake and swimming pool), a municipal tram and motor-bus service, a workhouse, four hospitals and the football ground of Medbury Wednesday, First Division Champions as far back as 1905 and Winners of the F.A. Cup a year or so later. And just beyond the football ground was Medbury Asylum, at whose massive doors there came knocking alienists from all over the world to study and observe the celebrated regime of Dr. Adrian Voyles, himself born and bred at Medbury, and now one of her most famous sons.

To anyone coming from the softer south, Medbury and the Medburyians might well have seemed hard, harsh, crude, taciturn, discourteous, grasping and almost callously indifferent to all else but their own well-being. But to Bert, the only surviving child of a drunken Middlesborough labourer, the

town itself wore something of the aspect of *El Dorado*, and the towns-folk seemed easy, well-dressed and incredibly affluent.

Unskilled labouring in the locomotive works for eight hours a day at thirty-two shillings a week soon failed to satisfy Bert's notions of a tolerable existence. At the end of two years he had managed to save twenty pounds, and a sudden windfall of eighty from an uncle enabled him to escape from his bondage. It was, however, not so much his dissatisfaction with the work, wages and general conditions in the works that urged him to make a change in his life, as the fact that he had by this time become engaged to Jane Milligan, whom, as an assistant in the grocery department of Bronson and Edwards, he secretly considered a cut above him. Upon that question, and almost upon that one alone, Bert and Jane's friends and relatives met on common ground and achieved an undivulged agreement. He did not know what Jane thought about it and was careful to sheer away from the topic if it loomed anywhere near the conversational horizon, and he would undoubtedly have been surprised, pleased and even grateful had he but known that to Jane, the admiration and affection of this fair-haired, merry-faced, muscular young man was the most precious possession she had ever had and, into the bargain, a piece of good fortune for which she was ready to kneel down and return thanks to any gods that were. That this good-looking Bert Larkins, with his waggish tongue, ready laughter and an indubitable way with him, considered himself a lucky chap to be courting her she would have found incredible.

They thus began their most intimate association on as sound a basis as may well be imagined.

With one hundred pounds in the bank and a scheme in his head, Bert felt himself equal to the task of asking Jane to marry him and of outfacing her supercilious relatives with at least

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a good show of indifference. But he felt that he needed something a little more concrete than a mere plan before coming to the point and, as so often happens, someone's misfortune came to his aid.

Medbury High Street was bisected into Upper High Street and Lower High Street by a road which cut it squarely at right angles and whose northern portion was called Franklin Road and its southern one Dover Street. On the one corner of Dover Street, abutting on Upper High Street, was St. Mark's Church. On the other corner, in Lower High Street, was *The*

Bird in Hand public house. Opposite St. Mark's Church, at the Franklin Road corner, was Dean's the tobacconist and confectioner, and across the road was Osborn, the hairdresser's.

Dean had eight children. Unluckily, his business instincts were not in the same class as his philoprogenitive ones. Further, he was a steady drinker, and an almost incredibly ill-starred picker of losers on far-distant race-courses. He cut his throat in the little coal-shed at the bottom of the garden early one bright hot Sunday morning while the more devout of the St. Mark's congregation were hurrying to early communion and his own family were fast asleep.

His affairs were found to be in a hopeless tangle and when the tangle had been unravelled out his debts were revealed as in the neighbourhood of three hundred and fifty pounds. A town collection paid these, handed the widow a hundred pounds and bade her and her brood of eight God-speed to Devonshire, where her mother and father on their small farm were prepared to do for them what could be done with willing hearts, hard, unceasing work and God's help.

"To Let" bills were placed in the window and Bert immediately began to see his intangible scheme assume the promise of material form.

One of Medbury's gods was Medbury's belly. It was not perhaps its chief, but it was certainly high up in the Medbury thearchy and its altar fires were never quenched; they did not even burn low. Medbury pork pies, for example, were not only devoured with vast zest and appetite by the townspeople all the

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year round, but were despatched in hundreds weekly to all quarters of the country. Few of its streets did not boast its delicatessen shop and if, unpretentiously, they merely called themselves Ham and Beef Stores, the goods they sold were not the less succulent for that modesty. And of those few streets where no altar fires burned to the god of Medbury's belly, Franklin Road was one. But within three months of Dean's surrender to the thrusts of uxoriousness and circumstance that lack was made good; and when Mr. and Mrs. Bert Larkins returned from a week's honeymoon at Sairmouth they passed through their own shop-door, above whose well-stocked window glittered in fresh gold paint the name *Albert Larkins*. Upon the wide window itself, in white porcelain letters adhering miraculously to the shining glass, was *Ham and Beef Stores*.

The new shop prospered from the beginning. Jane was an acute business woman and a first-rate cook — a true daughter of Medbury. Bert was an untiring worker and an early riser. He had a flair for buying good and avoiding doubtful stuff and as a salesman his wit, his waggishness, his quick smile and that way with him which had played such havoc with Jane's heart achieved for him a success decidedly not below his merits.

They rubbed along very comfortably for several years, the business increasing steadily, if not rapidly. John was born, quickly followed by Milly, George and Alice. But it was not until after Alice's birth, when they had been married seven years, that prosperity came to them with open hands. The idea was Bert's, but it was Jane's skill that really counted.

"What we want," Bert had said, "is something really good for Saturday night's trade — something that'll tickle their bellies like nothing else, and something no one else sells."

"Yes," said Jane. "I'll think about it."

The result of a week's thought and a further week's busy preparation was the inception of the Saturday-night pease-pudding and faggot suppers. Actually the sale of this savoury mess began at six-thirty and continued until eleven-thirty, and within a month Bert had to engage three extra hands for that strenuously exciting and amazingly profitable five hours. Medbury

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fell captive to the new dish, and for those five packed hours a steady stream of hungry folk carrying huge basins streamed through the door of the small shop, and a steady tinkle of coin dropped unceasingly into the tills. Other ham-and-beef stores were not slow to follow suit but, besides the initial advantage, there was apparently something about Jane's faggots and pease-pudding that was not possessed by their rivals, and customers who for a while strayed to other shops nearer their homes returned in the end to the pioneer shop. And they came back with compliments upon their lips almost as musical in Bert's ears as the tinkle of the coins dropping onto the zinc bottom of the tills.

Another "specialty" was the Larkins Flead Cakes, and later came the Larkins Eel Pies. And as a general standby there was the regular evening pigs' trotter trade.

By the time then that Bert had been married seven years he was a man of some substance, the father of four children, the owner of two trade-carts and a spanking mare and trap (all shortly to be replaced by cars) and, as he

said himself, he could “write his cheque for a thousand.” Jane still attended to most of the cooking, but she now had a maid to help her and a char-woman arrived each morning at seven to do the rough work. Behind the counter, assisting Bert, was a silentish, pimply, but very efficient youth named Tom Baxter.

But, greatest of all triumphs, the Milligan relatives were become models of effusive cordiality, a cordiality which did not confine itself to mere verbal expression but which broke out on birthdays and Christmas Days into a very spate of presents for Jane, Bert and the children.

CHAPTER II

YOUNG SIDNEY SURVEYS HIS ENVIRONMENT

THE year that followed the birth of Alice marked the peak of Bert's prosperity. It saw the two trade carts changed to Ford vans, the mare and trap to a quite luxurious saloon four-seater, the installation of electric lighting, and a double column of weekly advertising in the *Medbury Guardian*. It saw also the coming of another youth to assist Baxter behind the counter and only the lack of accommodation in the small house behind and over the shop forbade the addition of a second maid to the domestic staff.

But with the birth of Frank, the next year, the peak had been passed, and when Herbert arrived twelve months later the business was quite definitely on the down grade. So very definitely indeed that upon that hot July afternoon when Bert snorted and snored in uneasy sleep in the kitchen, and Jane slept with her seventh child beside her in the big bedroom over the shop, the saloon four-seater had long since been sold, the two Fords had become one, the maid had found other employment, and the two efficient youths behind the counter had departed to jobs where their weekly wage was less of an unknown quantity. The charwoman, it is true, still arrived at seven each morning, but now she stayed only an hour instead of the former three.

To a considerable extent the decline was due to the very trait in Bert's character which had set him on the path to prosperity. That trait was a bright optimism which made him, in his own words, a born gambler. Jane's relatives used the harsher appellation, chancer. That instinct for gambling, harnessed only to the purpose of legitimate business, had surely and steadily assisted

him along the road to prosperity; but when it began to kick over the traces and to career along such by-paths as backing winners and spotting certs, disaster was inevitable. And always just across the road there beckoned the glittering lights of *The Bird in Hand*, where the day's losers might be laughed at and forgotten and the morrow's certainties chosen. And so a very fair percentage of the still considerable profits of the Ham and Beef

business went into the till of *The Bird in Hand* and a much bigger one into the banking account of Sol Abraham, Turf Accountant, of 65 Upper High Street.

Nevertheless, during the early years of Sid's life, the business was still prosperous enough to provide comfortably if not generously for the large family. The Saturday night pease-pudding and faggot trade was still good and the Flead Cakes, Eel Pies and Pig's Trotters sold as well as ever, for despite her increasing domestic burdens Jane continued to do all the cooking of these delicacies and there remained just that something different in her productions which kept many of her customers faithful, despite Bert's increasingly inefficient service behind the counter, a handicap which was augmented by his growing casualness and occasional outbursts of ill-temper and truculence.

And yet it was Jane's very skill that formed the subtler influence which was at work in the disintegration of Bert and the business. For undoubtedly dyspepsia had them both in its grip. Bert's once sound, healthy stomach and all the smooth frictionless rhythms of his digestive system had begun to break down and surrender before the regular assaults of too-loaded platters too frequently provided and too quickly demolished. The trade of the shop necessitated the ever-present display of an abundance of richly attractive food, and appetite, sharpened in Bert's case by beer and in Jane's by hard work, felt neither the need nor the wisdom of discrimination. Moreover, there was always the temptation, late at night, to make a big supper of odds and ends which would be unsaleable the next day, and Jane's tired body and Bert's fuddled one were in no condition to cope successfully with such nocturnal loads as double helpings of pork pie, German sausage, galantine, brawn, rissoles,

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faggots and Welsh rabbit. It was certainly, in Bert's case, an unholy circle, for his increasing indigestion drove him to the public house to quell the gnawing pains in his stomach and his heavy drinking rendered that unfortunate organ less and less capable of standing up to its work. A similar unholy circle perhaps held Jane fast in its periphery, for the false hunger of the dyspeptic drove her more and more to heavy eating, and her resultant depression to the dubious stimulation of the teapot, which was never off the hob from morning till night.

And yet, despite everything, the forces of gloom by no means held the field in the small house over and behind the shop, and when young Sidney, at the age of four, began to look more closely about him and survey his world with an appraising eye, he found it in the main a quite excitingly jolly place.

The small world of his home surroundings, as surveyed through his four-year-old eyes, bore no likeness at all to its reality. The small, poky, dirty five rooms and scullery which made up the house behind and over the shop were vast apartments, each given over to certain rites and happenings and each a place of adventure, excitement and pleasure as well, at times, of fleeting miseries, irritations and dissatisfactions. And through these vast apartments moved familiar beings, linked so closely with them that they had at first seemed but little different from the chairs and tables, the pictures and doors and looking-glasses. They had always been there and he could not have conceived the possibility of this small world ever having lacked one of its intimate component parts, human or material. It had been a world ready-made and complete when his brain first began to register impressions of his surroundings and by the time that he could deal objectively with those impressions they had become as much a part of existence as daylight and darkness.

Without any consciousness of the mental process he accepted himself as the centre of this small world and however admirable, fine and worshipful these others were they were yet, in a curiously remote fashion, but lesser luminaries revolving round his central sun. But this realisation was only the companion

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of his solitary brief periods of thought and introspection. At all other times with, as it were, the mere surface of his consciousness he accepted them and responded and reacted to them according to the mood of the moment. The immense creature of uncertain although usually amiable temper whom, in common with the others, he called Dad was, with Mum, quite obviously the bestower or withholder of all things good or bad; they were the joint power behind this small world, its creators, supporters and rulers. But there were other lesser powers who ruled in this world, as far as he was concerned, for all that they were, equally with himself, ruled by Dad and Mum. From John, aged twelve, down to Herbie, aged six, they were arbiters of his fate, could grant or withhold, punish or forgive.

To this world of the house, the home, there were closely attached two other intimate worlds — the shop and the garden. And by way of these two, one came at last to the stupendous, the vast, magnificent and enthralling world beyond. For into the shop came beings from that outside strange immensity; and across the garden fence and over the garden gate one might too catch glimpses of those same unknown folk, so like and yet so unlike one's intimate familiars. And when one went out into the streets, there, stretching out forever on all sides, was again this great world; and there again, in bewildering crowds, were those others, those people (with few exceptions) incomprehensibly nameless, so alike and yet so unlike one's Mum and Dad, one's Johnny and Milly, Georgie and Alice, Frankie and Herbie.

Life was a regulated and ordered thing, from Sunday, with its church and Sunday school, to Saturday, with its penny to spend and its ritual of the hot bath. And in between were the five all-different days, when the others went off to school and all day long the shop doorbell tinkled as customers came and went.

There were his toys. There were all the domestic utensils of the kitchen. There was the savoury smell of cooking and the still more savoury smells that drifted in from the shop

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when the glass-panelled door was opened and the murmuring voices of Dad and customers swelled rumblingly. And murmurs and rumbles, save for occasional gleams of light, were equally incomprehensible.

It seemed that Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and the rest were, in some queer fashion, as alive and as individual as were Mum, Dad, Johnny and the others. Sunday was no more like Saturday than Mum was like Dad; nor did Tuesday bear any closer resemblance to Friday than did Milly to Georgie. And as he liked Johnny more and Frankie less than Georgie so in similar proportion were his affections bestowed upon Monday or Tuesday or Friday. Apart from the varying events and duties of the days (such as washing-day, early-closing day and church day, and so on) which marked them off from one another there was something which was in itself sufficient to give them individuality. This was dinner, that generous midday spread which, in its daily dishes, was as fixed as the incidence of the seasons. On Sunday there was (and there simply could not have been anything else without bringing to collapse the whole ordered world) roast

beef, Yorkshire pudding, baked potatoes, greens and for “afters” a fruit pie or jam tart. On Monday there was cold beef, boiled potatoes, pickled onions and cold pie or tart. Tuesday brought hash, bubble-and-squeak and boiled suet-pudding with treacle. Wednesday’s fare was Irish stew, followed by currant roll; Thursday’s was boiled salt beef with carrots and stewed prunes afterwards; Friday and Saturday drew on the resources of the shop, Friday presenting hungry appetites with corned beef, piccalilli, baked potatoes and Read cakes, while Saturday brought things to an exciting close with German sausage, pork pie, brawn and a treacle or jam roly-poly to hold it down, in Dad’s facetious phrase.

It was indeed a house for good trenchermen, big and little, and, as was inevitable where the trenchers were too large, too loaded and of too frequent appearance, it was also a house where pills and powders and salts were in such common use as to be almost a part of the dietary. Bert and Jane by this time suffered more or less chronically from indigestion, but the children

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(with the exception of Sidney) beyond occasional attacks of biliousness, gave few external indications of the daily battles taking place in their stomachs. But with Sidney there was no such happy immunity from ill consequences. It may have been that by the time of his conception both Bert and Jane were definitely dyspeptic, or simply that he was a reckling, a weaker vessel, a frailer plant; but certainly he was often bilious, sick and constipated, and was only saved from serious illness by such an utter distaste for food at these times and for days afterwards that he flatly refused to eat, despite every effort of his father and mother to coax his appetite. Threats from Bert of a good lamming were equally ineffectual.

Still, when everything was balanced up, it was a happy household, proof even against Bert’s Saturday-night boozings (presently to become nightly ones) which brought him home unsteady, flushed, obstreperous and dangerously quarrelsome, to wake the children from their sleep with angry and profane bellowings.

By the time Sidney was six he had unconsciously arrived at a childish philosophy (as his brothers and sisters had done before him) which enabled him to set off the good against the bad. And without any doubt the good far out-weighed the bad. Indeed, much of the bad was unrecognised as such, for it had always been part of his environment. And over and above all it

was a household where things happened — exciting things, jolly things. Both Bert and Jane were great hands at devising treats and planning outings, picnics and excursions; and whenever the weekly takings were a little more than usual, Jane would cook a great supply of cakes, tarts and buns and give a Saturday afternoon party to which the youngsters could invite their particular friends of the moment. Bert's treats were even more spectacular and at times when a horse *had* come home or a football coupon been filled in with miraculous correctness, he would proclaim his intention of springing a surprise on the family upon next early closing day. These surprises often took the form of a picnic on the banks of the Sair. They went by 'bus and took an immense hamper

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with them. In the palmy days of the saloon car they went farther afield and often put a crown to the affair by supping riotously in the gardens of a public house and driving home replete, warm and drowsy so long after the children's normal bedtime that this alone would have made the day a red-letter one. Even when the times of prosperity had been long left behind, Jane would somehow manage to provide these Saturday parties and Bert, by hook or crook, would succeed in persuading someone to lend a horse and trap or even a not too disreputable car.

And so, when Sid had reached the age of seven, his first climacteric, he could look back upon a life which, with all its troubles and pains, had provided many glorious compensations and promised many more.

There was one particularly outstanding outing, when they drove to Kitt's House in a borrowed trap. Kitt's House was an erection of ancient monoliths in the form of a rough, open-fronted cabin. It was some twelve miles out into the country from Medbury and was the townspeople's first choice when excursions and picnics were under discussion. It was not that it was at all worth seeing when one got there, being a very mean example of its kind, but it was a comfortable distance, it was somewhere definite to aim at, the journey there was through delightful country and on one's arrival three public houses competed for the honour and profit of patronage.

Sid was six at the time and John fourteen. Perhaps what made it so memorable an affair was that John was leaving home the next day for a training ship for the Royal Navy. This lent him a glamour and made him almost as fine and manly as Dad.

But the hamper they took with them would itself have made any day unforgettable. Although they were not to leave home till half-past one, Jane was up at dawn (it was mid-June) preparing that Gargantuan spread. There were two pork pics, nearly a whole ham (the sold portion having been unfavourably commented upon by one or two customers of the previous day), two dozen smoked sausages, a whole brawn, a 7-lb. bottle

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of mixed pickles, a cherry pie over a foot in diameter, two bottles of custard, a tin of mixed biscuits, a dozen oranges, a dozen apples and a tin of toffee.

Half-an-hour before the start the hamper had to be unpacked to make room for a gallon jar of beer. Bert was, as he said, taking no chances; the public houses wouldn't open until five and anyhow driving was thirsty work. His contention was justified by the fact that when they reached Kitt's House at four o'clock only about three pints of tepid but quite drinkable beer remained in the jar.

Sober, Bert's notions of prehistoric monoliths were hazy and decidedly on this occasion he was hardly able to do justice to paternal omniscience. However, the good humour engendered by the contents of the stone jar and the immediate prospect of a superb blowout enabled him to round the awkward corner with little loss of prestige.

"A sort of temple, son, I reckon," he replied to George's question. George was eleven, in standard six at the St. Mark's National School and quite able to give his father a long start in scholastic matters. He merely asked for the sake of asking and because he liked talking to Dad when he was in one of his jolly moods.

"But aren't temples big things?" asked ten-year-old Alice.

"Some are, some ain't," parried Bert, blowing out an acrid cloud of shag-smoke with immense gusto.

"But there aren't any windows," objected Frankie.

"Never had 'em in those days, my boy," explained Bert. "They lef' one side out like that there and that was door and windows, too. All Sir Garnet's long as it didn't rain, and I reckon when it rained they stopped at 'ome."

"A temple's a church, isn't it, Dad?" inquired Herbie, who was eight.

"Quite right, my boy," delightedly. "Got your head screwed on all right, all right, you have."

"Then where's the pulpit?" demanded Herbie ungratefully.

“Now you *are* asking me!” grinned Bert. “Taken away, I reckon, to put in some new church or make a rockery. Or

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p’raps they never had ’em. Come to think of it, o’ course, they didn’t. Never had hardly anything, those old coves didn’t. You wouldn’t believe, my boy, the things they didn’t have.” With an attempt to turn the conversation to more attractive issues: “No pork pies or cherry pics or pickles or sausages or——”

“What *did* they eat, Dad?” put in Alice.

“Things they caught. Bears and wolves and fish and — and — rabbits and all that. And all raw.”

“Were they cannibals?”

“You bet they was when they couldn’t get nothing else. ’S marvellous what truck people’ll eat when they can’t get nothing else. Why, Tom Perry told me last night in the — er — told me last night that his dad was in a siege or something in France and all the people in the town couldn’t get out and ct rats and mice, snails, worms and even their boots and shoes. Yers, Gawd’s truth, and what’s——”

“French people always eat snails, Dad,” observed Milly.

“Oh, and who tol’ you that?”

“Teacher.”

“Oh. Pity she couldn’t tell you a bit about old Kitt’s House here and save you worrying your old Dad.”

“She did.”

“Oh. Did she?”

“She said they was stones put over an old burial ground.”

“Well, there you are. What I said, wasn’t it? Ever see a church without a cimetry? Well, old Kitt’s House was the church or temple and all around here was the cimetry, and I lay if you dug round a bit you’d find more bones ’n you’ve ever seen in the shop, *all* of you. And talking of bones, there’s a knuckle of ham in the hamper, isn’t there, Mum, that’s just itchin’ to be eaten. And there’s *The Kings Head* opening. Now come on you boys, all of you, yers, young Siddy, too, and we’ll hop over and get bottles of ginger-beer and lemonade and bring ’em straight back and then hurray for a toothful of prime grub. What, Mum?”

“You’ll come straight back, Bert?” anxiously.

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“Can’t, Mum,” with solemn facetiousness. “There’s three turnings to the boozier and so there’s three back. And so——”

“Go along with you and do hurry up. We’re all famished.”

But it was the drive back in the warm June dusk, the stars just out in the dark blue sky, that remained an abiding memory with Sid. Dad was in the wildest spirits and laughed and sang the whole way home. The old horse, the reins loose upon its neck, ambled safely along the dusty road, its hooves going *clop*, *clop*, *clop*, *clop* — *clop*, *clop*, *clop*, *clop*, its queer-looking head bobbing up ever and again and its vast brown glossy rump heaving up and rolling from side to side. Mum, too, laughed a lot and sometimes joined in Dad’s songs. Sid thought it wonderful that anyone so old could sing so sweetly. They were all packed in closely, yet somehow it was gloriously comfortable. At every heave of the old horse’s rump Sid felt a delightful sensation in his stomach, like being on a swing. They were all drowsy. Even sailor John, who to-morrow was going on a ship, yawned and yawned and at last fell asleep with his head against Mum’s shoulder. Sid saw Mum stroke his hair and keep stroking it very softly and then bend down and kiss the top of his head. He looked up at the stars, now so bright in the deepening blue. A piece of toffee adhering to the roof of his mouth made every swallow taste delicious. Never in his life had he felt so happy, so utterly comfortable, so sleepy. Dad’s rollicking voice singing *Down at the Old Bull and Bush* sounded more and more remote. The *clop*, *clop*, *clop*, *clop*, was but a faint drumming. His head swayed over on to Milly’s plump little breast and he slipped into sleep. He only partially awoke as Dad lifted him down from the trap and had no very clear memory of anything else until he awoke about six next morning and, noticing that George, Frankie and Herbie in the bed with him were still asleep, turned carefully over with some difficulty upon his back and lay awake, with eyes shut against the light, calling up in little vivid pictures the wonderful happenings of yesterday.

Equally, if less pleasurably, exciting had been his first day at school when he was five years old. All the others had gone

to the St. Mark’s Infant School, proceeding thence to the senior department, although after Milly’s unhappy experience Bert had wanted to send the younger ones elsewhere. “I don’t like that old hen Abinger,” he’d said, referring to the Headmistress. “There’s a sight too much of the high horse

about her and I don't like Mister Parson Rendle, neither, for all his smarmy ways and soft talk and he's always poking his nose into the school and frightening the kids like the other one did young Ally." But the propinquity of the school won the day and having registered his protest, Bert shrugged his shoulders and said, "Have it your own way, then."

In the affair of Alice it was useless for Jane to point out that there had been a mistake and that no one had had any notion of frightening or wounding her and that Miss Abinger was well known for her kind-heartedness and her devotion to a thankless task. Bert refused to be convinced and in jocose moments was wont to refer to the school as the torture-house and to Miss Abinger as Jack Ketch's old woman.

When Alice was six she had arrived home sobbing one day to dinner and said that a big man and all the teachers had been laughing at her clothes. Bert, lit with several pints of *The Bird's* old ale, was for rushing incontinently over and punching someone's jaw, unmindful of the fact that at the moment there was no one there to assault. Jane only managed to quiet his fury by promising to go back with Alice after dinner and see what the trouble was. Miss Abinger was all apologies, but explained that it was an unfortunate occurrence which could not have been foreseen. The children had all been assembled in the school hall for a scripture examination by a visiting clergyman, who was a tall, dark, bearded man with a ponderous way with him. He had pointed a bony finger at little Alice and asked her sepulchrally, "My child, who made your vile body?" Alice happened to be wearing a print bodice ("body," as she called it) and a little serge skirt and she answered timidly, "Please, Mum made the body and Gran made the skirt." The visitor was surprised into a rumble of laughter in which the assembled teachers joined. Alice dissolved into tears and could

discover no other key to the situation than that her clothes, hitherto worn pridefully, were risible objects. Jane laughed at Miss Abinger's story and accepted the explanation in good humour, but Bert was not to be so easily placated. "The old hen's spruced you, Mum," he said when the children were in bed that night. "I lay the blinkin' sky-pilot was trying to be funny and if I could only prove it I'd give him one for his knob and chance the consequences." He said no more then, but for years afterwards, when a suitable occasion arose, he would refer to "that old psalm-singer who

frightened our Al.” Alice herself was not to be shaken from her belief and flatly refused to wear the offending garments again.

Sidney awoke on the morning of his first day at school with the almost immediate consciousness that it was to be a great day. He knew school as a wonderful place where the others all went, where they did marvellous things and had dozens of friends. Their experiences there gave to their ‘talk an esoteric flavour which left him completely out in the cold. And now he was to go to school and become one of them. He was up and washed and dressed before any of the others, restlessly excited, yet with a trace of uneasiness in his stomach. He didn’t want any breakfast and was eager and yet un-eager to be off. Mum was taking him and as they neared the big iron gate his grip on her hand tightened and his heart began to thump.

It wasn’t so bad in the Headmistress’s room. She talked very pleasantly to Mum and smiled at him. She smelt nice, too, and had the whitest teeth and the cleanest hands he’d ever seen. But when she rang a bell and sent for a Miss Whittle, or something like that, and a fresh-faced young woman appeared and took him by the hand and Mum let go of him and appeared about to go, things assumed suddenly and unexpectedly a vastly different, almost menacing, aspect. He looked from Mum to Miss Abinger and then back again. His lower lip drooped and quivered. And then Mum smiled and said, “Be a good boy, Sid, and don’t forget to wait till Johnny calls for you.” He choked back an imminent sob, achieved a wan smile and, obedient to a slight gentle pull on his hand from the fresh-faced

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young woman, accompanied her out of the room. In a few minutes he found himself standing beside Miss Whittle’s desk in a big, airy, light classroom with eighty mildly inquisitive eyes fixed upon him. For a second he returned that massed stare, but surrendered suddenly before its power and looked down at the floor. He was heartily relieved when he was placed at a small dual desk, but for a long while he did not glance at the other boy occupying it. The morning went off pretty well. He found a dozen things to interest him and was amazed when in what seemed no time at all they trooped out for the second time into the corridor, went through the cloak-room where he was relieved to find his cap, and then out of the big door where Johnny was waiting for him and he knew that it must be dinner-time. He was full of his experience, but Johnny didn’t seem to be listening and twice on the short way home stopped to talk to boys and seemed to forget

all about him. But Mum and Dad made up for Johnny's indifference and allowed him to chatter on all through dinner and were obviously keenly interested. It was grand to have so much to tell them. He didn't want to eat at all and when Herbie slyly transferred his three pickled onions to his own plate he allowed the theft of those favourite relishes to pass without protest.

By the end of the week he was completely at home and before the month was out he'd been late twice, been admonished aw-fully by Miss Abinger for dirty hands, been twice kept in by Miss Whittle for impudence, and had discussed darkly with the boy next to him the pros and cons of playing the wag, which was Johnny's name for truanting and was, he knew, a feat he would have to perform if he were ever going to be the sort of boy that Johnny was, to say nothing of Georgie, Frankie and Herbie. He never did, in fact, play the wag.

Each year, in September, Medbury held a Fancy Dress Carnival in aid of the hospitals. There were prizes offered for the best decorated tradesman's vans, the best decorated cycles and the best van-tableaux. The procession of vans, preceded, flanked and followed by the cycles, left the Town Hall about seven-thirty, lit with fairy lamps and Chinese lanterns,

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and paraded through the main streets which were packed with the townsfolk, who threw confetti, bandied jokes with the police, the drivers of the vans and the actors in the tableaux, and added to the din with squeakers, hooters, whistles and trumpets. Medbury, to the best of its small ability in such exotic enjoyments, abandoned itself to the spirit of revelry, grew hot, dusty and dishevelled, and by ten o'clock had succeeded in creating a somewhat sordid pandemonium and becoming extremely drunk.

Bert, for some years, refused to enter a van. "Can't make a tableau out of ham-and-beef," he explained, "and we've got all the trade we want anyway." It may have been that declining business decided him to change his mind, but certainly when Sid was six, his father determined to enter his van. The carnival was always held on Wednesday, the Medbury early closing day, and at the previous Sunday dinner-table Bert became loquaciously boastful as he carved the seven-pound piece of silver-side. "We'll show 'em a thing or two, my lads. Make 'em sit up. What's the first prize? Five quid, ain't it? Well, it's ours. And we'll have a blowout out of it. A real beano. None of your Kitt's Houses this time. We'll go for a day's trip

to London. Yers, all the blinkin' lot of us." He stared round triumphantly at the faces of his family.

"Do mind the clean cloth!" protested Jane. "You're splashing the gravy about something awful."

"That's all right, Mum, we'll buy a dozen new 'uns. Yers, a day in London. See the Zoo and Madame T'sords, and — and — all the rest of it."

"George and Frank want new boots for the winter and Alice and Milly'll have to have winter coats," ventured Jane mildly. "If you win the prize, Bert, it'd be better to—"

"*If!*" flourishing the carving-knife and avoiding the controversial issue. "Why, blimey, Mum! It's in my pocket. Now any more for any more before I cut a bit for yours truly? Righto. Now you listen all of you. I've got it all worked out. Ever heard of Oliver Twist? Yers. All right, *all* right, Ally! Don't want to know what your teacher says. 'S long as you

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know about him that's enough. Well, you kids'll all be Oliver Twistes and keep shouting for more. See? Blimey, it's plain as the nose on your face. Mum stands — yers, you're in it, Mum, 'course you are — Mum stands all dressed up like a — a — chef over a stove (soon fix that with Tate sugar-boxes and a bit of black paint). We'll have the two big boilers on top and all you kids keep coming round pushing and jostling, *you* know, with plates and basins and hollering, 'We want more o' Larkins's faggots and we want more o' Larkins's pease-pudden.' How's that, eh?"

"Keep shouting all through the streets, Dad?" asked John dubiously. "Why, it takes over two hours to——"

"On and off, my boy, *on* and off. Now we don't want no wet blankets over this little turn-out. Want to see Madame T'sords, don't you? Very well, then, not so much of it."

The cool reception by his family failed to damp Bert's ardour and during his spare time on Monday and Tuesday he worked on the van. A dress rehearsal on Tuesday evening set light to the decorations and by the time everything was ready on Wednesday morning the tableau had cost nearly as much as the first prize.

The Larkins tableau certainly made a hit, but it was the wrong sort. Bert had primed himself with beer for the triumph and, a reckless driver in his soberest moments, he was in no mood or condition to limit his speed to the necessary slow pace of the procession. The affair was always a matter of

constant, abrupt stops and sudden jerky re-starts and within five minutes of leaving the Town Hall Bert was in difficulties with the tableau in front of him. That is perhaps to put it mildly, for the wheels of the two carts were locked and Bert was engaged in profane argument with the other driver, whose tableau was a baker's kitchen showing Ossett's Family Loaves being prepared with quite overpoweringly hygienic carefulness. One of the assistants, who was kneading dough, was moved to join in the argument with a well-aimed ball of that most temptingly suitable substance, and the lump taking Bert full in the face ended both the altercation and the Larkins's participation in

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the procession. Bert, striking out wildly with his whip, hit his mare who, after one surprised and almost reproachful glance over her shoulder, tossed her head and set off at a quite respectable trot through the scattering crowd. Bert, now beside himself with fury, lashed out madly and blindly and the trot became a gallop whose wild progress ended shatteringly against a pillar-box in a side-street. No one was hurt, but the last touch of disaster was added by the firing of the decorations, and before the fire could be put out the van was burnt beyond repair.

It was a wet, bedraggled and ashamed family circle that gathered round the kitchen fire while Jane got hot cocoa and bread and cheese for them and Bert went off somewhat vaguely, "to see about fixing things." But presently, having stowed away much bread and cheese and cake, and sipping their hot sweet cocoa by the fire, things took on a less catastrophic aspect, and by the time they went to bed they had already begun to find it as much of a joke as anything else. And certainly Mum was not long in laughing over the whole business.

But what perhaps made it all so memorable to Sid was his waking up about an hour later and feeling hot, thirsty and rather sick. He lay for some time hoping it would pass off, but after a while, feeling worse, he crept from bed and tiptoed downstairs to ask Mum if she would give him something. He opened the kitchen door softly. Mum did not hear him. She was sitting by the burnt-out fire, one hand over the back of a chair and the other clenching a handkerchief in her lap. She was crying. Sid had never before seen her cry. He had not known she could do so. Terrified, appalled, overwhelmed with a sudden immense misery that made him forget his

sickness, he turned away, closed the door softly and, creeping upstairs, cried himself noiselessly to sleep.

Of more general excitements that stood out in his recollection there were Sunday School Treats and Band of Hope Outings. Bert insisted upon all the children joining the St. Mark's Band of Hope, possibly because the pledge-signing gave him a vicarious feeling of self-denial, but more probably because it left the house clear of children from six till eight every Tuesday evening.

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These yearly Band of Hope outings were usually to some seaside resort about thirty or forty miles away and the memory of one in particular, to Westwich, when Sid was seven, remained in his memory all his life, for upon Westwich sands, just one hour after their arrival, began his first love affair. It was so tremendous, so unbelievable a business, that he never afterwards recaptured those emotional heights. The Band of Hope Superintendent's little daughter, Daisy Olcott, was eight years old, dainty, golden-haired, incredibly lovely and, to Sid's eyes, always dressed like a Princess. Every Tuesday evening for many months he had watched her sitting beside her father upon the platform and she had seemed as completely remote from him and all his doings as that fabulous person known as the King who lived in London. It never entered his head to attempt to speak to her. And so when, on Westwich sands that sunny morning (as he stood watching the sunlight on the sea, a little lonely and disconsolate because his brothers and sisters had left him for a while to his own company) a big girl came up to him and, stooping a little, said with a laugh, "Daisy Olcott says you're a peach." He could only blush and shift awkwardly from one foot to another. And then, O God of miracles! He saw Daisy standing not twenty yards away and smiling frankly and openly at him as he had seen other girls smile at boys. And a quarter of an hour later he found himself, still unable to believe this amazing tiling had happened, walking along the sand side by side with Daisy, well away from the crowd and talking and boasting to her in a strange, tense voice that he did not recognise as his own. She made for him of that day a romantic fairyland and long before the afternoon was over they had kissed, not once but many times, and vowed to be sweethearts for ever. He could not travel back in the train with her because she would be with her father, but she promised to

meet him after tea the following day and go for a walk with him to Keston Banks, where most of the boys and girls went sweethearting.

Five evenings, spread over nearly three weeks, he went for enchanted walks with Daisy and then, one shattering Sunday

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afternoon when he came out of Sunday school and seeing her coming along the road towards him, hastened to meet her, she passed him by, after one swift glance, as if he were a complete stranger. And as he stood staring after her, trying to persuade himself that she had not seen him, an older girl came hurrying back, grinned at his woebegone face and said maliciously, "Daisy says you're soppy, and she goes with Freddy Emmett now." He walked slowly home, wrapped about in an atmosphere of unbearable misery. He felt he could not face his brothers and sisters or Mum or Dad. He must be alone with this intolerable aching pain. And so, as there was nowhere else that he could go, he shut himself up in the W.C. and there abandoned himself to his sorrow. Discovered there later by Mum, his wan white face was interpreted as the herald of sickness and he was given two Beecham's pills and put to bed. There he cried himself to sleep and in the morning his lack of appetite and his general listlessness earned him a day's holiday. He was better the next day and was packed off to school with the others, but the hurt of that sudden unexpected stab remained with him many months.

It was shortly after this emotional upheaval that Medbury held high holiday for a day to celebrate the completion of a new locomotive engine, *The Lord Nelson*, which had been designed by Mr. Francis Dashwood, the C.R. Works Manager, to recover the speed record that had been taken from the C.R. by the North Midland Railway's flyer, *The Duke of Marlborough*.

The schools were given a whole holiday and all the shops were closed. The employees of the works were given the day off with an extra day's pay. There were sports in the recreation ground where vast marquees dispensed cakes and tea gratis to all who came. And in the evening there was a display of fireworks. But best of all was the Mayor's garden party in the grounds of the Manor House, to which came many of the Medbury bigwigs. Mr. Dashwood was the guest of honour and from the outside world there came quite overwhelmingly celebrated people, including a real baronet and an indubitable

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duchess. There were fireworks also in the Mayor's grounds that evening and large numbers of children and not a few adults deserted their own spectacle to crowd around the Manor House in the hope of catching a glimpse of some of the great. The adults peered through the iron railings and the children climbed them. Among these young climbers was Sid. And with amazing good fortune he saw walking arm-in-arm along one of the paths the Mayor and Dr. Adrian Voyles from the Asylum and a most extraordinary-looking gentleman in a frock coat and grey trousers. Not that Sid found these garments extraordinary. It was their owner's immense shock of black curly hair, long black beard and vast booming voice that held Sid glued stupent to the iron railings long after the trio had passed from sight.

Had someone told Sid that the possessor of that obstreperous voice, that shock of hair and that mighty windblown beard was one day to be the central figure in an event of world-wide importance, he would, in as far as he understood what was being implied, have expressed not the slightest surprise; that extraordinary figure seemed capable of anything. But had he also been told that the whole of his life from the age of twenty was to be entirely changed by the act of that personage he would have found no words to express his utter unbelief.

CHAPTER III

DECLINE AND FALL

I

SIDNEY at birth, compact of the characteristics of innumerable ancestors who had contributed to the make-up of this new being, was ninety per cent, of the man he was going to be. Environment had by the end of his seventh year already contributed most of its small share in the creation of the man, twisting a little here, slightly warping there, adding a faint bias in this or that direction, accentuating, toning down, firing or damping. It was to contribute more of its small share during adolescence, but already he was essentially the being he would remain through life.

The Larkins boys and girls shared certain family traits and characteristics, but were naturally in some ways less like one another than they were like boys and girls of other families. Sid had perhaps less of the obvious Larkins characteristics than any of them, and what resemblances he showed were superficial. One marked difference from his brothers and indeed from most of the boys with whom he mixed at school and in the streets was his hatred of fighting. John and Frank, in common with hundreds of other boys, were always fighting, seemed to like it and went out of their way to engage in battle. George and Herbert, equally in common with hundreds of others, were indifferent about fighting; they didn't particularly want to fight anyone at any time, but if the thing came along they neither embraced it eagerly nor went out of their way to avoid it; they just fought and had done with it. But Sid loathed fighting with an almost frenzied horror. To avoid combat no

shift or subterfuge was too outrageous, too mean, too shameful, too cowardly. To be jeered at or called a coward he considered a trifle if by enduring it he could escape the dreadful scowls and whirling fists of boyish pugnacity. He was not to be egged on to fight by the usual methods; it was quite useless to give him his daddens (a punch on the shoulder which served the dual purpose of a challenge and the initial advantage of the first blow); he simply bolted or, if that were impossible, lay down and covered

his head with his arms. He would tell the most preposterous lies to apparently sympathetic youngsters as to why he had run from a threatened fight of yesterday or was totally unfit to engage in an immediate menacing one — he had taken pills, was just going into hospital, had sprained his ankle, swallowed a pin or some other wild fancy invented at the prick of the scared moment.

And so by divers unhonourable shuffles and artifices, and at great expense of spirit, he had succeeded in avoiding combat until he was nearly eight. And then he suddenly surprised himself even more than he did his tormentors, and for nearly two wild minutes fought with a berserk fury that he was not to know again for years.

Mr. Saunders, the Headmaster of the St. Mark's National School, officially forbade fighting, but as far as possible ignored transgressions of the prohibition and there was, in fact, a small field behind the playground where fights took place regularly after school hours. Occasionally these fights would be planned and organised by some of the bigger boys, a rough ring would be set up and hundreds of the boys would gather to watch a quite bloody affair lasting over an hour. But far more frequently just a handful of youngsters would gather to watch the settling of some classroom squabble. And now and again two boys, suddenly infuriated, would fall viciously upon each other in the playground and fight it out then and there. Only blind fury risked such battles, for Mr. Saunders brooked no such foolishly flagrant violation of the rules and, refusing to discriminate between aggressor and defender, awarded both six stinging strokes on their bottoms.

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No power in heaven or upon earth could have goaded Sid into defending himself in the playground, for he dreaded the cane even more than the whirling fists. But he happened to be playing in the small field when school was over one afternoon. The field was used for the gentler sort of games by younger boys when the playground was occupied by the bigger ones playing football. Sid was sitting in a corner with a crony playing a mild kind of gambling game with cherry-stones or gobblers. A boy of about his own age strolled up and noticing Sid's big bag full of gobblers (he'd been steadily winning) picked it up and said, "These are mine, Larky."

Sid flushed. "They're not. Give them back, they're mine."

“No, they’re not. You nicked ’em from me. Yes, you did.” Inventing joyously, “You took ’em from under my desk.”

“I didn’t,” almost crying. “They’re mine. I’ve just won them.”

About a dozen boys of all sizes had now gathered and one of the bigger ones said jovially, “Stand up, Larky; go on, hit him; punch his snout.”

Sid didn’t move. “They’re my gobblers,” he repeated miserably. “I’ve just won them. Haven’t I, Dinger?” appealing to his crony.

But Dinger (whose name was Bell) perhaps with a hope of getting back some of his lost gobblers, said shamelessly, “No, you haven’t.”

“There you are!” jeered the cause of the dispute, stuffing the bag of gobblers into his pocket. “Tol’ you so. They’re mine. Nicked ’em in class, you did.”

Dinger, seeing his chances of getting any in that quarter growing remote, drew a bow at a venture and said, “He’s got some of mine in his pocket.”

“I haven’t!” cried Sid, now almost beside himself.

“You have. Come on. Gimme them back.”

A big boy lugged Sid to his feet and deftly turned out his pockets. Dozens of gobblers fell to the ground. They were a spare store and had been borrowed from Herbie. Dinger himself scrabbled them up and pocketed them. Encouraged by the

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grins and comments of the bystanders, he walked over to Sid. “Dirty thief,” he said, and gave him the traditional blow on the shoulder. “There’s your daddens. You’re afraid to fight.” This was so patent that the remark seemed supererogatory, even to the most fervent apostles of the obvious among the quite considerable little crowd now present.

Sid cowered and shrank back against the boys now pressing around him. “Go on, Larky, hit him on the smeller.” A rough hand shoved him forward. “’Fraid to fight,” repeated Dinger gaily and punched Sid on the mouth.

Perhaps the accumulated wrongs of the last five minutes, culminating in that smashing blow on the lips from the crony who had betrayed him, ousted from Sid’s body for one flaming second the real being inhabiting it and replaced that shrinking entity by a demon. The colour drained from his face, leaving it deathly pale, his eyes stared, he shivered uncontrollably. And then with madly whirling fists he not so much leaped upon Dinger as engulfed him. Rarely has Nemesis so swiftly overtaken betrayal. Still more rarely has right so immediately vanquished wrong. In something under

ninety seconds the unlucky Dinger was down and out with a badly marked face, cut lips and many more painful facial sensations than he had hitherto experienced in his short career. Older boys present had to go far back in their memories to parallel the effusion of blood from his nose. Down he certainly was, and if he were not “out” in the strictly orthodox meaning of the word he certainly was as far as human intention goes. No leech could have stuck more closely to a body than Dinger adhered to the ground as he lay there bellowing.

Attention was suddenly diverted to Sid, who had also dropped to the ground and was being sick. Willing hands picked him up rather too hastily; willing feet ran to get him water. Quite an admiring and laudatory small crowd presently accompanied him out of the field and quite fifty yards along the street. “Young Sid Larkins! Who’d ’a’ thought it. Cool! He can’t half fight. Served Dinger right, didn’t it?”

But the demon, devil or spirit of some ancient warrior who

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had entered Sid’s body during that wild affray never renewed his visit and for the remainder of his schooldays at St. Mark’s he continued to avoid battle with all the old craven pretexts and evasions.

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Medbury, as Sid’s seven-year-old legs carried him, alone or accompanied by Mum or Dad or Gran or one or other of his brothers and sisters, farther and farther away from home along and through its spreading streets, roads and byways, gave him an ever-increasing sense of its vastness, its hurrying busyness, its rich and strange magnificence and its frightening air of being a great complete world so near and yet, as soon as he had turned into the High Street and walked along a little way, so utterly distant and remote from home. Birmingham, near where he was presently to live for four years, and London, where he stayed for a week when he was twenty, never over-awed him, disturbed him, oppressed him with so overwhelming a sense of immensity. Medbury remained to him all his days as the mightiest of its kind. When later in his schooling he read of such places as Babylon and Rome, the printed description of them failed to touch his imagination until he had translated them into terms of Medbury; having done this, they became so closely associated, so easily

interchangeable with Medbury, that he would walk along the High Street peopling it with men, women and children of the ancient cities and half expecting — as a rattle of wheels and hooves sounded behind him, to see a chariot overtake him and go racing along towards the towering arches of the railway bridge.

Dad, by this time a little shrunken physically in his eyes, somewhat fallen from his pinnacle of omnipotence, from his high place as the giver of all things pleasant and unpleasant, as a cracker of jokes and provider of treats and outings, was still, in his way, a way of course that differed from that of the Mayor and the bigwigs, a great personage; still the most important member of the family circle despite a something or other that was faintly derogatory, something not unconnected with *The*

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Bird in Hand and that earned him not only Mum's silent disapproval when the children were about but her angry scolding when they were safe in bed and supposedly asleep. Mum herself had not changed. She may have been a trifle older, but she, like Dad, had always been among that great adult majority which is always old. To Sid's eyes she never changed in any noticeable fashion and when he was twenty and said good-bye to her at the end of his furlough she seemed in every way the Mum of his earliest recollection.

Medbury folk in Sid's eyes consisted of familiar folk such as customers, neighbours and tradesmen; "people," which included all Medburyians who were of his own class, and the great ones who were almost as much creatures of another world as those kings, queens, princes, popes, lords, ladies and judges whom one read about in history or saw pictures of in Dad's *Daily Mirror*. These great ones included the Mayor, the proprietors of the big shops, doctors, solicitors, the C.R. Works Manager, clergymen, the police superintendent, the captain of the fire brigade, scores of other business and professional men and quite a small host of well-to-do retired tradesmen, who mostly lived in the big villas backing onto the recreation ground. The wives and families of these great ones of course shared their remote splendours. Mr. Saunders, Sid's Headmaster, perhaps because of familiarity, only hovered on the fringes of the great, and his own teacher and all other teachers were definitely out of it, although not quite being among the people. The familiarity which in Sid's eyes deprived Mr. Saunders of the coveted rank was also responsible for a certain dubiety

which he felt concerning the place of the Vicar of St. Mark's and also that of Dr. Venning who came to the house when they were ill. Familiarity was ever to be Sid's false touchstone in allocating people to their rightful place in society.

It is doubtful if Sid had any very clear awareness at any time during his first seven years that the family fortunes were going rapidly downhill. There was always plenty to eat and drink; there were always fires in winter and a sufficiency of warm clothing and sound boots and shoes; there always seemed

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a fairly constant stream of customers passing daily through the shop door; there was no lack of occasional pennies for sweets and when Dad pulled a fistful of money out of his pocket to look for such a penny it always consisted of an astounding collection of half-crowns, florins, shillings and even crumpled notes. And when Johnny had gone off to his training-ship the box Mum packed for him certainly couldn't have been bettered had the Mayor's wife packed it for her own boy away "at college." And each time Johnny returned from his holidays it was the same. Milly, too, who now served in the shop, dressed on Sundays and Wednesday afternoons in clothes that anyone might have been proud of — a queen can't do much more than wear silk stockings, high-heeled shoes and a satin coat with a fur collar. And certainly neither Mum nor Dad ever grumbled or were gloomy or showed any anxiety.

And yet, blind perhaps as Sid was to it, the Ham and Beef Shop was in a bad way and the hundred pounds a week turn-over of its palmy days had dwindled to a not always certain ten. But shortly after Sid's eighth birthday two disastrous happenings in quick succession laid bare the truth even to his childish imperceptiveness.

A Mrs. Hanson, the wife of a boilermaker in the C.R. works, bought a dozen faggots from Bert's shop one hot July Saturday evening and she, her husband, her fifteen-year-old son and her twelve-year-old daughter ate them for supper. They were all taken ill during the night with violent abdominal pains, were rushed in a collapsed and semi-conscious condition to the hospital, where the boy died the following afternoon. At the inquest, which was adjourned until the parents were well enough to attend, the medical evidence was that the boy had died from ptomaine poisoning and that the food eaten at the supper was responsible. Mr. Hunaker, a local

solicitor who represented Bert, obtained a reluctant admission from the mother (who was convinced that the faggots were responsible and apparently nourished the vindictive hope that Bert would be arraigned for murder) that the dish of faggots had been garnished with tinned baked beans. The house surgeon who

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had conducted the post-mortem agreed that these were probably the cause of the trouble and Mr. Hunaker hammered the nail home by pointing out that as hundreds of faggots had been sold at the Larkins's shop that evening and eaten without any ill-effect the faggots could not be to blame. The doctor, however, replying to a question from Mrs. Hanson's solicitor, agreed that out of a thousand faggots made from the same material it was possible for a dozen to be poisonous and the rest harmless. The coroner partially nullified the effect of this admission by observing that it would be an extraordinary coincidence for one family to get the whole dozen and he returned a verdict of death from food poisoning without any further qualification. Bert had given evidence, but as it had degenerated into a furious defence of the purity of his goods he was stopped in full spate and his angry expostulations at this treatment did him small service. The whole matter, however, ended with the verdict, as far as legally allocating any responsibility for the death, but it was plain during the following weeks that the case had scared Bert's customers and struck a possibly fatal blow not only at the faggot and pease-pudding trade but at the whole business of the shop.

The loss of trade might not have been irrecoverable in time, and even the faggot and pease-pudding side might have regained something of its former dimensions, had not a second blow fallen shortly afterwards. Osborn, the hairdresser on the opposite corner, wanted to retire, but, being unable to dispose of the goodwill of the business as a going concern, sold out all his stock and fittings and left the shop empty. A few weeks later it was opened as a fish shop by an alarmingly efficient Welshman named George Evans. Evans, a lank, sallow, rufous man of middle age with a saffron-hued, stout, silentish wife and five cowed ginger-haired children, was a teetotaller, a non-smoker and a lay preacher at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. And when one Saturday night, a month after opening, he started his nightly fish-and-chip trade, Bert, watching bitterly from his

empty shop the endless stream of customers pouring into Evans's, knew in his heart that the game was up.

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An hour later, seeking the solace of the four-ale bar of *The Bird in Hand*, he sat in a favourite corner with Fred Paston, his boilermaker crony, and for a while drank pint after pint in silent gloom.

"Bloody Welsh rat!" he said suddenly, removing his pipe and spitting on the floor.

"Who's that, Bert?"

"Evans," growled Bert, "that Welsh bastard *opposite* me." With wry facetiousness, "Evans, good 'eavens, Bible-punching Evans."

"*All* bastards, Welshmen are," commented Fred impartially, "and worse. What's he been up to now?"

"Aw, nowt," sarcastically, "on'y taking the grub out of my kids' mouths. That's all, mate."

Fred, seeing that the navigation of these conversational waters was likely to be too delicate and difficult a matter, merely nodded non-committally and then, in an attempt to change the subject, observed judiciously, "If Medbury's not careful this season we'll be in the second league next year."

But Bert was not to be diverted from his grievance. "Fair competition any man can stand," he went on, "but what can you do with a bloke who gets up at four, stops up to midnight, don't drink, don't smoke, don't do nowt except graft and say his b——prayers."

"R. You're right, Bert."

"And knocks his old woman about something chronic, to say nothin' of his poor little bastards of kids. Ever see such a crowd of white-faced, red-nosed, scared little——s in all your life?"

"What he wants is a bit of his own medicine."

"What he wants is what he'll get. I can stand a lot, but," darkly, "there's a bleedin' limit to all things. He must be clearing twenty quid a week and his old woman looks like a skivvy and his kids like — like — Gawd knows what."

"Twenty quid a week, eh?"

"Easy. Went in the bank last Monday and there he was, the yellow-faced Welsh rat, handing the doings over the

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counter in wads. And talking to the bleedin' manager like Gawd amighty. Fish and chips! There's truck! Sooner put sawdust and paraffin into my guts I would. Where's the blood in it? That's what I want to know."

"You're right. On'y time we have fish is Good Friday and," grinning, "then I stops out and has an extra pint or two and a beef sandwidge. Beer and beef!" heartily, "eh, Bert. I'd like to see Evans trying to swing my twelve-pound sledge with only fish in his guts. Can't be done!"

"I'll swing him one on the chops one of these days if he's not careful."

"Wouldn't do that, Bert. He wouldn't hit back. Call a bleedin' rozzer and have you run in. Have the laugh then."

"Would he?" viciously — "not when I'd done with him."

"No good cutting off your nose, Bert. You'd get quod's like as not. He's in with half the bleedin' nobs."

"Let him! Give me five minutes with him on the quiet and I'd do six months on my 'ead and laugh at it."

"Your old woman wouldn't have much to laugh at. Nor the kids, Bert. 'Sno good cutting off——"

"Stealing the bread and butter off their plates, he is," with a swift transition to maudlin self-pity. "*That's* his Gawd's loving-kindness, that is. Fine sort o' way of doing things that is. What I always say is show me a Bible-puncher and I'll show you a thieving rat."

"You're right, Bert. And show me a teetotaller and I'll show you a skunk."

"Yers. *And* one who's up to no good when nobody's looking. Won't drink a pint of good honest beer, but don't mind doing things that'd make a decent man spew. Blimey! lights out! Sharp on time, ain't they? Quick enough to get you *out*. Let's have a quick'un." Getting up a little unsteadily and lurching over to the bar, "Couple of scotchies, missis."

"Said you'd only be gone ten minutes," observed Jane angrily, as he pushed open the kitchen door; "and it's now nearly eleven."

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Bert's glance ranged round the room and came to rest upon the empty table. "What about a bite of supper?"

"Well, you can get it."

"Oh? Like that, is it? What about you getting it?"

"I've had mine."

“Oh? How about mine?”

“I’ve said you can get it. I’m tired.”

“Oh, I ain’t, I suppose?”

“I’ve been working since you went out at half-past eight, serving customers, cleaning up, putting the children to bed and——”

“All right. Don’t make a song about it. I been——”

“I know where you’ve been and the less said about that the better.”

“Oh?”

“Unless you *want* to talk about it?” angrily.

“I want a bite o’ something. You going to get it?”

“No.”

“Oh? And what about where I’ve been, eh? What about it?”

Jane turned round in her chair. “All right, if you *will* have it. I’ve stood about enough and I’m standing no more.”

“Oh, you ain’t?” sitting down heavily and trying to light his empty pipe. “You ain’t, eh?”

“No. This boozing’s got to stop.”

“How’s that? And who’s going to stop it?”

“You are. You’ve been over at *The Bird* more’n two hours to-night and how much you’ve boozed away I don’t know, but I can tell you how much we took to-night, and it wasn’t enough to pay for the beer you’ve drunk.”

“Oh? You seem——”

“And it’s every night more or less now. We haven’t made three pounds this week. Thomson’s bills haven’t been paid for over a month nor have ——”

“Aw, shut up! Thomson’s all right. He can wait.”

“P’raps. And Foster can wait and Mason and Cobb and——”

“Put a sock in it!” furiously.

“You needn’t shout.” Suddenly pleading, “Look here, Bert,

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you’ll have to stop this boozing. Things are bad and there’s no getting over it.” Her voice shaking, “if you don’t pull up now it’ll be — I don’t——” Despairingly, “All right, I’ve done with it.”

“Well, I’ll chuck it, old mate,” contrition almost moving him to tears. “I will, straight. I’ll chuck it. How’s that?”

“All right, Bert. What d’you want for supper?”

“That’s the ticket. What’ve you got? Any faggots left over?”

“*Any!* Nearly all we cooked.”

“Didn’t we have *any* customers? Thought you said——”

“About a dozen. Most of them went to Evans’s. Crowds there were. Like queuing up for the pictures.”

“Stow it! Think I’m blind?”

“Must be, I should say,” her anger rising again.

“Wha’ d’you mean by that?” truculently.

“If you hadn’t been blind you’d have seen the way things were going months ago. Every night crowds going into Evans’s and how many here? And even Saturdays!”

“Shut up for cri’sake!” roaring. “I seen it. The dirty Welsh bastard. Snot of a Bible-punching teetotaller. If I get——”

“He knows a better thing to do with his money than pour it down his throat.”

“He what?”

“You heard what I said.”

“Oh? Like that, is it? Think he’s a better man than I am, do you? Pity you couldn’t have married him. Sing a different tune then, I lay. Ask his old woman. Knocks ’ell out of her.” Grinning, “Gets his muscles up on the Bible and then slugs her good and proper. If *that’s* the sort of man you like, why — ’ere, where’re you going?”

“Bed.”

“What about——” but the slam of the kitchen door behind Jane cut his question short. “Bloody fine state of affairs!” he mumbled self-pityingly, as he moved slowly over to the pantry. “Get my own supper, I suppose. After twen’y years an’ all.” He surveyed the dishes of piled up faggots. His lips curled.

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“Faggots! Gawd amighty! Faggots!” He seized dish after dish and hurled them shatteringly to the floor and then, turning out the light, went stumbling and swaying up the stairs.

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During the next twelve months, as what was left of the ham-and-beef trade slowly dwindled to nothing, Bert spent his time brooding behind the counter, sullenly and morosely serving the rare customers, or boozing in

The Bird in Hand, paying for drinks if he had any money and cadging them when funds were out. He came to ascribe all his misfortunes to George Evans and would pour out his wrongs to any ear willing to listen, accompanying the relation with dark and bloody threats of vengeance upon the Welsh rat who had broken up his home.

Milly had had to leave home and go into service; George had become errand-boy at an off-licence; Alice, still at school, took neighbours' children out in her spare time for a few shillings a week, and Frank and Herbert sold newspapers in the evenings. Only Sidney, now nine, contributed nothing to the meagre family purse.

More and more Bert took to standing in the doorway of his shop watching the stream of customers entering Evans's fish-shop, and occasionally he would cross over the road and leaning against one of the awning-supports stare balefully at the busy scene within. For an hour at a time he would lean there muttering, sneering and trying vainly to catch the Welshman's eye in the hope of finding some excuse for a row. But Evans was not to be beguiled even into an exchange of glances and still less into an unprofitable argument. He adopted the maddening pose of complete unawareness of Bert's presence and often as he hurried out to superintend the loading of his two smart Ford vans he would pull himself up short within a hair of collision with the watcher, affect a mild start of surprise and pass on, his eyes fixed straight ahead and with a faint pursing of his lips for which Bert dredged his vocabulary in vain to discover a suitable appellation.

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One close hot evening in the late summer Bert had run out of ice and the meat which Jane intended to use on the morrow for their threepenny pies was beginning to offer to more than one sense evidence that another twelve hours of warmth would render it unfit for sale or even their own consumption.

"I'll borrow a lump from that Welsh rat," said Bert with an angry grin. "He's sold out almost and don't need it."

"He'll not let you have it," replied Jane. "Go round to Ditchley's — they'll let you have some."

"Oh, won't he? We'll see!"

"I shouldn't, Bert. He'll only be too pleased to have the chance of refusing."

“Will he, the sod! Oh? Now, that’s enough, Jane. I’ll have that chunk of ice of his or I’ll know why.”

He lit his pipe, and hands in pockets, strolled across the road and stood for a few minutes looking down at the block of ice around which were some half-a-dozen or so plaice and soles. The rest of the huge window-space was empty. Evans had sold out. It chanced that there was no customer in the shop at that moment and presently Bert walked in and leaned on the counter. Evans, pretending to be busy with a pile of papers, kept his back turned so long that Bert at last rapped impatiently.

“Oh — ah! Good-evening, Mr. — er — er — Larkins.”

“Evening.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Run out of ice; you’ll not be needing that chunk there long. Might let me have it.”

“Sorry, Mr. Larkins. Very short of ice myself just now. Need all of it.”

“Sold out a’most, haven’t you?” truculently.

“Very nearly,” with great affability, “but not quite. Although perhaps I may say,” expansively, “*quite*, for I believe Mrs. Evans promised me a fish-supper to-night and Dover sole I find very tasty. The children prefer plaice. More filling for their young stomachs, no doubt.”

“Fat lot they’ll get,” muttered Bert, his temper rising at the factitious amiability.

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“I beg your pardon?”

“*That’s* all right. I’ll take the ice and I’ll send over a chunk when the cart calls in the morning.”

“Sorry, I can’t spare it.”

“Well, then, I’ll buy it.”

“It’s not for sale.”

“Then blimey I’ll take it!” leaning over the marble slab and grabbing at the block.

“Let that alone, Mr. Larkins.”

Bert put a hand into his pocket and withdrawing a shilling, slammed it on the slab. “There’s a bob — more’n it’s worth.” He began to drag the ice towards him. Evans came round from behind his counter and, putting a hand gently on Bert’s shoulder said calmly, “Now look here, Mr. Larkins, the ice is not for sale. Please leave my shop or I——”

“Put me out, eh?”

“I shall have——”

“*Put* me out, eh? You dirty rat. Well, go on. Do it.”

“I shall send for the police.” He glanced over to the telephone and made a movement as if to go towards it when Bert seized the largest plaice by the tail. “Call the police, would you, you Welsh bastard!” he roared. “Well, tell ’em *that!*” swishing round the plaice and catching Evans full in the face.

The Welshman struck out blindly to ward off the blow and his open hand inadvertently struck Bert’s face.

“Fight, eh?” Bert roared, the accumulated passions of the last twelve months finding sudden swift and joyous release. “Fight, you Welsh rat, eh?” He seized the fishmonger round the waist and, lugging him towards the shop window, tipped him over on to the marble slab and falling on top of him, began to rub his face into the fish.

Goaded by his wrongs, lit by the wild exuberance of battle, it was well for Bert that at this moment one of his victim’s vans drew up outside and the driver, a burly youth, quickly realising the state of affairs, vaulted through the open window and dragged his battered employer free. Doubtless lucky for Bert, certainly lucky for Evans, but by no means so fortunate for the

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driver; for while Evans, white and shaking with fear and anger, rang up the police, Bert, still possessed of his mad berserk joy, set about that youth and knocked him out. He then gathered up the block of ice in his arms and hot, dishevelled, somewhat bruised and abraded, but riotously and vociferously triumphant, bore his prize across the road to the shop.

“Got it! Said so, didn’t I?” grinning, but avoiding Jane’s stare of dismayed anger.

He dumped the block in the tall ice safe, closed and locked the door and turning round faced his wife jauntily. “And taught him a lesson, too, I have,” he chuckled breathlessly.

“Yours is to come,” replied Jane dully, nodding her head towards a police sergeant and constable who were pushing their way into Evans’s shop through a small crowd of people.

“Got *his* first, ’tanyrate!” a trifle more soberly. “’Sno use you looking like a wet week, old girl. Fie asked for it and he got it and dam’ his eyes. As

for the rozzers, dam' their eyes, too. Here comes one of 'em. Get no change out of me."

Police Sergeant Robinson entered the shop and closed the door in the faces of the following crowd. "You'll have to come along to the station with me, Mr. Larkins, I'm afraid," he said pleasantly.

"Oh? What for?"

"Should've thought you'd have known," shrugging his shoulders with a smile. "But you'll find out when you get there. Don't be a fool," he added, as Bert began to redden and show signs of battle, "and make things bad for yourself. You'll only be charged and can come home again if you can find a small bail." He looked over towards Jane. "I'll find it for him, Mrs. Larkins, if there's any difficulty. He'll be back in half an hour. We'll go out the back way, I think. Come along."

A week later Bert was ordered by the local bench to pay a fine of £5 and £3 costs or fourteen days, and was further required to pay Evans damage to the amount of £6 10s. 4d. He was given a week to pay. He would certainly have had to serve the sentence, Jane's most frantic efforts being unable to rise more than seven pounds, but at the end of the week Sergeant

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Robinson dropped in to say that the full amount had that morning been sent to the station. He congratulated Jane upon the happy outcome, but confessed complete ignorance of the identity of the donor.

Bert spent most of that evening making wild guesses at the solution of that puzzle. Unable to hit upon anyone feasibly likely to have acted with such strange madness, he took one of the seven pounds, begged and borrowed by Jane with so much shame and humiliation, and retired to *The Bird in Hand* to continue his mental investigations. Closing time found him still in doubt and upon that point both his and Jane's curiosity remained unsatisfied.

The stout, saffron-hued, silentish wife of the fishmonger might have set both their minds at rest had her own not been completely taken up with the problem of how to balance her quarterly housekeeping without accounting for an extraordinary expenditure of fourteen pounds, ten shillings and fourpence.

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CHAPTER IV

ROUGH EDGES

A FEW weeks before his tenth birthday, Sid scampered down the stairs early one morning at the postman's knock and, picking up from the mat a long blue envelope addressed to his father, took it into the shop, where Bert, pipe in mouth, was rearranging a small pile of tinned meats upon one of the shelves.

He took the letter, stared at it and then thrust it into his trousers pocket. "Had any sweets lately, Sid, boy?" he asked.

"Yesterd'y, Dad."

"Not 'smorning?" with affected surprise.

"Not been out this morning yet. And shops aren't open till eight, Dad."

"Lazy dogs. Never make a fortune that way, son. We've been open since seven. Not," gloomily, "that that's done us much good. My oath, no! Only little Bessie Gimmett in for a penny tin o' mustard. And here's the brown for you, Sid, boy, so bang go the profits on *that!*"

Sid, having trotted away to see if breakfast were ready, Bert drew the envelope out of his pocket, tore it open and, leaning up against the counter, set himself to master its contents, pointing the lines with the stem of his pipe. But even his meagre scholarship was not slow to grasp its contents. It was from Harbin, one of the town solicitors, and intimated in quaintly couched but only too comprehensible phrases that Bert's many creditors had charged Bert's obedient servant, Alfred N. Harbin, to collect monies due to them from Mr. Albert Larkins, Trader, of 1 Franklin Road, Medbury, Meadshire, to the grand total of one hundred and ninety-nine pounds, four shillings and sixpence.

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"Might have made it two hunderd while he was about it, the snot," muttered Bert, after he had recovered somewhat from the first shock. "Some hopes he's got of getting it," bitterly. "Gawd amighty! Here's a how-de-do." He folded up the letter, replaced it in its envelope and, buttoning it up in his hip-pocket, re-lit his pipe and went on with his work. A few minutes later Herbert came to call him in to breakfast and having eaten a slab of brawn, four or five slices of bread and dripping and drunk

three large cups of tea, he filled his pipe, lit it and sauntered back into the shop. He stood staring out of the window at the sunny street. The school bell was ringing loudly and presently he heard the side door bang and saw Alice, Frank, Herbie and Sidney pass the window on their way to school.

Presently he went back into the kitchen where Jane was clearing away the breakfast things. "Got much to do to-day, old mate?" he asked with unusual gentleness.

Jane shrugged her shoulders. "So so," she said quietly. "Why?"

He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "Mind if I leave the shop to you for the morning? Feeling a bit dicky, I am. Think I'll go for a walk to Keston Banks and get a bit of appetite for dinner. Been off my scrán for a week now."

"All right, Bert. Won't be much doing, I expect. I can manage."

"That's the ticket. Be back by twelve." He walked over to her and removing his pipe put his arm about her shoulders. "Give us a kiss, old mate." She raised her face to kiss him, told him he needn't hurry back and a moment or two later heard the back door shut noisily behind him. She sighed and going over to the sink lowered a pile of plates into the enamel bowl and turned on the hot water tap.

It was well after ten when Bert reached Keston Banks, where over twenty years before he and Jane had gone courting and where young Sidney had sweethearted so rapturously with his first love.

He was tired, footsore and sweating from the unusual exercise in the hot sun and dropping down at the summit of a

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slope, he lay quietly smoking and looking out over the wide valley of the Sair, stretching away for miles below him until its more distant prospect, misty in the heat haze, was merged into the blue of the horizon.

Presently he sat up, took out Harbin's letter and read it through several times before returning it to his pocket.

"Gawd amighty!" he muttered. "Here's a bloody fine how-de-do. Two hunderd quid. Might as well be two thousand. What Jane'll say Gawd only knows. The skunk! An' these rats. Couldn't come and ask for it like men. Oh, no. And the times I've treated Thomson, and Foster. Didn't lend Cobb our four-seater to go to Sairmouth with his little lot half a dozen times. Oh, no. Dreamt it, I reckon. The rats. Well, a fat lot they'll get. Can't get blood out of a stone. Like to know just what their lay is. Smash me up good and

proper. Send me to quod. Hope they'll enjoy it. And when their time comes to be a bit short, hope some sod'll do them a thick 'un. Gawd I And if I could only've tided over till the cold weather I'd've pulled round. Just my luck. And always has been. Always have caught it right in the neck ever since I was a kid. Make it rough on the kids this will. Broke to the wide. Well, they'll get nowt anyhow. *Some* consolation. Sell me up and get about a bob in coppers. That's their game, I lay. Every bleedin' stick and pot and pan. And the goodwill o' course," bitterly. "Where do we go next, eh?" staring into the cold bowl of his pipe. "Workhouse. Well, thank Gawd Johnny and young Mill are out of it. George, too, ought to be able to rub along. Find a place for Al in service, p'raps. Still leaves the three nippers and Jane. That's the snag, that is. Blast the bloody rats. That swine Thomson. On'y last Saturday in *The Bird* letting me stand him a couple of pints and all so jolly. 'Well, cheerio, Bert, old china; here's how!' Dam' his eyes! Two hunderd bleedin' quid. And after twen'y years." He plunged a hand into his trouser pocket and drew out a fistful of loose money. He dropped it into the grass and counted it slowly, ranging it in copper and silver heaps. "Twelve and ninepence and two French browns. And if Jane takes half that to-day she'll be lucky." He looked at

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his watch. "Reckon I'll stop here for a bit. Can't face the shop to-day and that's a fact. Have a crust of bread and cheese and a pint at old Sawyer's place and get back to tea. Said there wasn't no need to hurry anyway. There ain't that! If she only knew. Might as well stop here for keeps. Wish to Gawd I was dead and out of it. Twen'y years toil and moil and now smash. If I only had some of those rats here I'd have my money's worth if I had to swing for it." He lay back, tipped his cap over his eyes and presently fell asleep.

He woke about one o'clock and after having bread and cheese and a few pints at George Sawyer's *Bald Hind* at the head of Keston Banks, spent the afternoon roaming aimlessly about and sleeping. He returned to Medbury about seven and without going home, entered *The Bird in Hand* and, making for his favourite corner, settled down to drink himself into forgetfulness. But half a dozen or so pints in the course of the next two hours achieved only a part maudlin, part quarrelsome muzziness and about half-past nine he became so noisy and truculent that the proprietor nodded meaningly to George, one of the potmen, who came from behind the bar

and, taking Bert by the arm and shoulder, piloted him outside. There his submissiveness abruptly changed to pugnacity and, striking wildly at the potman (who had had many a big tip from him in the past) he was violently clouted and left sitting in the gutter. "Swine!" he muttered thickly. "Grateful swine. All a man gets after doing kindnesses f'years. Swine!" He picked himself up slowly and unsteadily and, miraculously avoiding the traffic, reached home as the Town Hall clock was striking ten, and let himself in at the back door.

The children were in bed and Jane was sitting alone in the kitchen mending a pair of Frank's knickers.

"Where've you been?" she asked with a weary asperity that changed to anger as she noticed his condition. "See I needn't ask," she ended bitterly.

Bert dropped into a chair and fumbled for his pipe. Failing to find it quickly he gave up the search and sat staring blankly at the floor. Jane did not speak again and the long silence began

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to oppress him so that it was almost with an air of grievance that he said presently, "Wha's the ma'er, ol' — ol' mate?"

"You better go to bed."

"Wha' for?"

"Best place for you."

"Oh? Well, I'm not going. Got something to say to you."

"Keep it till you're sober."

"Sober enough. Got something to show you."

"I've no time for anything just now. I've an hour's mending in front of me and then an hour's cooking and after that——"

"All right, stow it! You can cut out the cooking, 'tanyrate."

"Oh?"

"Yers. 'Sno good. Got me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Nor do you. You'd better go to bed."

"Course you don't. That's what I'm going to show — show you. Just a min — minute," pulling the letter, now grimed and creased and worn, from his pocket. "Here, read that. Tha's what I got to talk about. Got me? Read that. Bl-bl-bloody wars and b-blue ruin, that is. Yers. Read that."

Jane took the letter from his outstretched hand and read it slowly. He sat watching her. He saw the blood drain from her face, saw the knickers drop

to the floor, heard her give a short, stifled cry and in another moment, shocked into soberness, he was kneeling beside her as she lay in a dead faint upon the floor. He had no idea what to do. He bent over her distressfully, chafing her hands, tugging at the collar of her blouse. "Gawd, what's up, old mate! What've I done! Don't look like that, Mum. Gawd amighty, what've I done?"

Jane opened her eyes and sat up. She pushed him away and, getting to her feet, sat down unsteadily. He went over to his chair and, sitting down, watched her white face with abashed, miserable eyes. "Feeling better, old mate?" he said thickly, licking his dry Ups.

"I'm all right. When did you get this?"

"Smorning."

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"And kept it all day to yourself."

"Didn't want to upset you, Mum."

"Why you got drunk, I suppose, so's not to upset me."

"Don't talk like that, old girl. I didn't mean to go boozing. Felt so bleedin' miserable didn't know what I *was* doing."

"No. You owe two hundred pounds and then take ten shillings I'd borrowed to spend on beer. Stole it's the right word, I reckon."

"Here, stow it, old mate! What're you talking about? Stealing! Cripes! Cheese it!"

"Well, what d'you call it? Took it out of my purse, didn't you? Wouldn't've mattered if it was mine. But it was borrowed. Know how much is in the house barring the other few quid I borrowed for the rent? No, and don't care either, I suppose. Well, I'll tell you. Fifteen shillings. And what d'you think we're going to do when we're sold up?"

"Ask me another." Moodily, "Workhouse, if you like."

"Workhouse, is that it? Let me and the children go into the workhouse. That's your idea of it. And what are you going to do?"

"Aw, shut up! I'm fed up with it. Cut my bleedin' throat, I expect."

"Not you. You're all——"

"Shut up, will you!" roaring furiously and crashing his fist down on the table. "Shut your bloody——"

"Stop swearing, you — you — waster. Stop it, d'you hear?"

"What! Waster!" rising to his feet and shouting the words in an insane fury. "Gawd! Say that again!" standing over her and raising his clenched

fist.

She stared up at him and then dropping her face into her hands she burst into tears and began to rock herself backwards and forwards in her chair.

He stood for a moment glaring wildly down at her and then striding over to the back door, flung it open and went stumbling up the garden path, out of the gate and into the now almost deserted street.

She presently ceased to cry and, shivering slightly from the

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draught that was banging the back door to and fro, got up and closed it. She then put out the light and walked over towards the door leading to the stairs. As he heard her footsteps approaching, Sidney, who had been wakened by the noise of the quarrel and had crept downstairs to listen at the door, scurried back to his bedroom and, jumping into bed, lay there with a wildly thumping heart. He heard his mother's dragging footsteps go slowly past the door to her bedroom. He lay awake over an hour, a prey to utter and desolating misery. But it was long after he had fallen asleep that that balm came to his mother's relief.

By breakfast time the next morning Bert was not returned. Jane told the children he was away on business, packed them off to school and, single-handed, carried on the work of the house and the shop.

That evening, after the children were in bed, she closed the shop and went round to see Bert's mother, now nearly eighty, but still physically quite active and seemingly as mentally wide-awake as ever.

"I don't like it, my dear," the older woman said. "'Tisn't like Bert. Rush off in a tantrum, yes, but not stop away like this and leave folks worrying. Bert wouldn't do that, as you know for yourself as well as I do. He'd a peck of faults — more'n most, I daresay — but hurting folk that sort of way wasn't one of them."

"What ought I to do?" asked Jane on a note of helplessness that was utterly unusual. For the first time in her married life she was beginning to feel that circumstances were too much for her, that she was unable to go on with the struggle — no longer, in fact, wanted to — had reached the point where she did not care what happened next. It was almost as if she were incapable of caring.

The old woman, bunched up in her big chair, a bony grotesque little figure in her clothes of a bygone generation, took off her spectacles, cleaned them on her apron and, replacing them on her thin nose, regarded

her daughter-in-law with screwed-up eyes and pursed, wrinkled lips. "Do, my dear?"

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Why, wait a bit longer'll do no harm. If it was some men I'd say do nothing, he'll come back soon enough when he wants a good meal and a bed. But as it's Bert, I'd not wait longer'n to-morrow afternoon and then you'll have to tell them."

"The children, you mean?"

"Well, I didn't mean the children, my dear, but you'll have to tell them too sooner or later. Or someone else will."

"You mean the police?"

The old woman nodded. "It can't be helped, Jane. They'll poke their noses in soon enough anyhow. He owes all this money, and what with one thing and another——"

"You mean something must've happened to him?"

"I do mean that, my dear."

"Not — you don't——"

"No, my dear, I don't. He's not that sort. He wouldn't kill himself and leave you in the lurch like that. With all the children. Bert isn't that sort."

"Not when he was right in his head or — or — sober, but——"

"Not mad *nor* drunk, my dear, Bert wouldn't do that. And if he don't come back by to-morrow tea-time you'll have to go to the station. And if you like to send two of the children here — Frankie and young Siddie — why, they'll be no trouble to me. They're always good with Gran." Her dim eyes peered through her big glasses at Jane's face. "'Tisn't no use upsetting yourself, my dear. 'Twon't make it any better. It takes a woman hard even when her man's been a bad one, but worrying don't make it any the easier. That's what you must do, my dear. And how are the children? And how's the shop?"

"Might as well close for all we're doing. P'raps 'twould be as well——"

"I wouldn't do nothing of the sort, Jane. Keep the shop open and keep Alice away from school to look after it for a bit. She's nearly fourteen now. Don't do anything different till you get some news o' Bert and know how you stand. And now you be off to get a sleep. And before you go you're to have a bottle of stout with me. Now, no nonsense! Get two bottles

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out of the larder and two glasses. They're behind the bread-tub. It'll make you feel better and make you sleep. Don't believe I'd sleep at all if I didn't get my drop of stout. That's right. Now 'sno need to hurry over it. Does you more good if you sip it. And you can tell me about Johnny and Milly. Going to show me Johnny's last letter from China, but you never did. And Milly in France with her people. It's a comfort *they'll* be all right, anyhow."

No news having come from Bert by the following evening, Jane closed the shop and went down to the police station. The superintendent saved her the embarrassment of a recital by saying, "All right, Mrs. Larkins; I know something about it and we'll do all we can. Perhaps you'll answer a few questions and give us a little more information to go upon. Sergeant Robinson over there will tell you all we want to know."

A week went by without any other result than an increase of customers, most of whom came to gossip rather than to buy — or at least to look for material for gossip with their neighbours. But Jane avoided serving in the shop as much as possible and even the most hardened among them drew the line at interrogating Alice. But failure to gather facts lent a spur to their imaginations and before the week was out suicide was one of the mildest explanations of Bert's disappearance.

On the Tuesday of the second week Mr. Harbin, the debt-collecting solicitor, called to see Jane during the morning. He found her out, and Alice explained that Sergeant Robinson had come just after breakfast and that Mum had put on her hat and gone out with him. And that was all she knew about it.

But by noon it was common knowledge that Bert's body had been found in the Sair, twenty miles away and only a few miles from Sairmouth on the estuary.

During the following week to Jane and the children life assumed the strange remoteness of a story read in a book. There was the inquest with the verdict, "Found Drowned." There was the sale of the small stock, the shop fittings and the furniture of the house. And last and most overwhelming of all there was the break-up of the family and the abrupt coming to an

end of a life, with all its familiar and accustomed things, which was the only one the children had ever known. Jane took a housekeeper's post in Hampshire. George went off to London to be apprenticed to an uncle who kept an ironmonger's shop in a northern suburb. Alice, whose fourteenth

birthday coincided with the day of the sale, was taken into the Manor House as a scullery-maid. A childless uncle and aunt, who had a comfortable farm in South Devonshire, took Frank and Herbert, and Sidney, as a very special favour, was admitted into Peckover Royal Orphanage.

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Peckover Royal Orphanage, situated about twelve miles to the southeast of Birmingham and within a mile of the growing town of Enderton, housed some one hundred and eighty boys and girls from the ages of five to fifteen. It was ruled by a board of seven governors, four of whom were Birmingham business men; the remaining three were a solicitor, a retired army captain, and the Rector of St. Asaph's Church, Enderton. The staff, besides the usual domestic one, consisted of a master and matron, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hall, a drill sergeant named Huxtable, and a nurse. Formerly it had had its own school on the premises, with a headmaster and a staff of four men and women; but with the rapid growth of Enderton and the building of several large elementary schools within a radius of two miles of the orphanage the governors had decided that it would be more convenient and less trouble and expense for the children to attend the new schools outside. And with this decision there arose the question of the orphanage uniform. Until that time the boys had worn a semi-military royal blue serge tunic and trousers, and the girls navy-blue blouses of the Jack-tar pattern and skirts reaching half-way down the calf. This raiment was worn by all the children of whatever age, winter and summer alike.

But having decided that the youngsters should go into the outside world for their schooling, the governors considered, with commendable humanity, that the old uniforms would be

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an embarrassment and a handicap to their charges. The meeting at which the whole business had been thrashed out was a long and somewhat heated one and the victory for ordinary clothes was only gained by four votes to three, the Rector, the solicitor and Mr. Ephraim Bates of Bates's Multiple Stores, voting with voluble obstinacy against any such breaking away from the eighty-year-old traditions of the orphanage.

But the victory, as far as the children were concerned, was a barren one, for the civilian clothes finally decided upon were those of a previous generation. And so into a world where the normal boys wore jerseys, shorts, socks and shoes, the orphanage boys emerged wearing Norfolk jackets, Eton collars, made bows, rice-bags that fastened with elastic under the knee, black stockings and black boots. The girls, wearing pigtails, serge bodices and skirts with big white pinafores found themselves side by side with youngsters with bobbed hair, bare arms and legs and the daintiest of frocks. And many times each day of the two hundred and twenty days of the school year, ninety-five girls little and big of the Peckover Royal Orphanage suffered and endured the heartache of the stared-at. And eighty-five boys big and little of the Peckover Royal Orphanage suffered and endured maybe equally as much. But of the eighty-five there were some who refused to suffer either in silence or inactivity and with hard fists and a staying power due to plain rations, early rising and military drill, taught their luckier schoolfellows the wisdom of a still tongue. These assaults occasionally brought letters from parents to headmasters. The letters were forwarded to Mr. Arthur Hall, the Master. On the principle that an orphan is always in the wrong, he handed over the culprit to Sergeant Huxtable for disciplinary measures which, in mild cases, consisted of six strokes upon each hand with a cane and in severer ones of from six to a dozen strokes upon the bare buttocks with a bundle of birch twigs. Sid never raised a hand against his schoolfellows, but none the less he did not manage entirely to escape the sergeant's attentions.

Most of the children were doubly orphaned and it was for such as these that the orphanage was founded, but there were

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a few, like Sid, with a father or mother alive. But in no case was there a home to go to and holidays therefore were spent at the orphanage. Only once during his four years did Sid pass a night beyond its precincts — six nights, to be exact, of a wonderful week's holiday at Sairmouth with Mum, Frank and Herbie during the summer of his second year. The matter had had to come up before the governors and again it was a narrow victory, so narrow and so hotly contested indeed that the losers managed to carry an amendment that it should be the last similar request to be granted.

The orphanage was run upon the well-ordered wheels of perfect discipline. In summer the children rose at six and worked in the gardens,

the laundry or the carpenter's shop until seven. At seven there was drill until seven-thirty and from seven-thirty till a quarter to eight was devoted to washing and tidying-up. Breakfast at eight o'clock consisted of bread and margarine and tea. This was varied on Wednesday by porridge and treacle and on Sunday by cold boiled bacon and bread. Outside schools took up the morning and afternoon. Dinner was at twelve-thirty. The menu was simple, the changes being rung regularly upon Irish stew or vegetable soup and boiled potatoes or salt beef, carrots and turnips. There was no sweet. Tea at five was bread and jam and tea all the year round. Sundays brought a welcome piece of cake but omitted the jam. Tea was followed by further work and a supper of bread with a cup of milk at eight o'clock, with bed at a quarter past, rounded off the common day. Winter, which officially began on December the First and ended on March the First, was marked by one hour longer in bed in the mornings and the lighting of the furnaces of the central heating apparatus. As the Master's house was warmed by coal fires and the furnaces were under the charge of Sergeant Huxtable, a man fond of his bed, the carpenter's shop on the colder winter mornings was misty with the breathing of the workers, whose clumsy fingers frequently fumbled tools to the detriment of their clothing. Sid's first thrashing, a mild affair of six handers, was awarded for an unusually large bloodstain upon his knickers.

The first Sunday in every month each breakfast tea urn contained a teacupful of Epsom salts and there was no shirking the refreshment.

There were six bath cubicles and boys and girls bathed on alternate nights. It worked out roughly at a hot bath every nine days and baths were refilled for every fourth child. Bath superintendent's duties were shared by Sergeant Huxtable and the nurse. Both carried canes as wands of office and what the water often lacked in temperature was more than counter-balanced by the burning heat of stripes.

Saturdays were working days. On Sundays all attended matins at St. Asaph's and were, taken for an hour's walk in the afternoon in two long crocodiles which went in opposite directions; that direction which the boys went on one Sunday the girls went the next. Sunday evenings were devoted to a service conducted by the Master, with bed an hour earlier than weekdays to give an opportunity for silent meditation and communion with God. This meditative hour was considered of extreme importance and the Rector

of St. Asaph's, as well as many visiting clergy, adjured the children with eloquent fervour to use that solemn hour with their Maker to crave forgiveness of sins, the bestowal of grace, and strength to fight against future temptation.

Sid entered the Peckover Royal Orphanage at the age of ten. He was then a rather undersized, thin youngster, thoughtful, sensitive, timid to the point of cowardice, easily hurt mentally and physically and as quickly and easily responsive to pleasurable stimulation. And he could, given encouragement, chatter and laugh and frisk about with a quite unexpectedly joyous abandon.

He left Peckover at the age of fourteen to proceed to a training-ship for the Royal Navy. He was then physically spare, wiry and tough and certainly not under the normal height. But he was, if possible, more timid, more cowardly than at ten. The matter of response to pleasurable stimulation had arisen so rarely during those four years that it may be discounted. An abandonment to joyous emotions had been equally rare. He

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now hid himself within himself and from that dark hiding-place stared out upon the world with eyes that, spiritually blurred and mentally out of focus as they were, yet comprehended enough of life to have startled and appalled the good Rector of St. Asaph's had that gentleman been capable of receiving the revelation.

Sid passed from the training-ship into the Royal Navy at the age of seventeen and a half. He had added in these three and a half years four inches to his height and three stone to his weight. Otherwise he had changed but little. And if the eyes that still stared out upon the world from their dark hiding-place now comprehended something more of life, that added something seemed of so small value as to be scarcely worth the time and trouble taken to obtain it.

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CHAPTER V

BOMBSHELL OF PROFESSOR DIGBY FERRARS

WHEN Sid, a peering inquisitive six-year-old, had climbed the Mayoral railings on the day Medbury made revelry for the completion of *The Lord Nelson* engine he had watched with some awe but more astonishment the antics of an extraordinary person, vast, obstreperous and hirsute, clad in a frock coat and pale lavender trousers, who was walking arm-in-arm with the Mayor and Dr. Voyles from the asylum. Walking hardly described that person's progress; antics kept far closer to the truth of a perambulation varied by waving gesticulating arms, leaps into the air, smiting of fist upon palm, wide embracing almost menacing sweeps of outflung hands and sudden abrupt halts that involved himself and his companions in violent and embarrassing collisions.

Arnold Digby Ferrars, Doctor of Science, Doctor of Laws, one-time Professor of Applied Physics at Pay ton University and corresponding member of many learned societies was a showman. He was also a man of science of unquestionable achievement, a liar, a charlatan, a scandalous amourist and an indubitable genius.

His nationality was doubtful, the honour of producing him having been claimed and repudiated by an equal number of countries. At different periods in his spectacular career he had himself laid claim to birthplaces in Ireland, England, Canada, The United States of America and Germany, but finally allowed it to be known that as a British subject he was born and as such wished to live and die.

In his speeches, books and pamphlets it had always been difficult for the layman to separate the claptrap of the charlatan

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from the authentic pronouncement of the scientist and the Press of the world had found that problem so often a snare that it had come at last to weigh down the balance of judgment upon the side of charlatanism and to treat all Ferrars's pronouncements as bunkum, but a bunkum out of which much hilarious copy could be made.

The inventions claimed by Ferrars similarly ranged from the utterly and fantastically outrageous to the domestically handy, and were, in the end,

placed in the same category as his pronouncements.

Nevertheless, side by side with such grotesque literary productions as his *Evidences of the Survival in Modern Man of the Angelic Dorsal Structure* had to be placed his scientifically acclaimed *Acquired Characteristics and the Ductless Glands*. And as a set-off to his death ray, his etheric wireless valve for receiving messages from the dead, and his electric divining rod for medical diagnoses, there had to be remembered the Ferrars Televisor, the Ferrars Pocket Speech Recorder, the Telephone Recorder, and the automatic Balance for Aircraft.

If his public life were a very welter of contradictions, his private life was equally bewildering in its contrasts, and indeed so provocatively as to rule out “private” as a hopelessly unsuitable adjective to tack on to any of his activities. Avowing himself a devout member of the Church of Rome, he was nevertheless as enthusiastic, voluble and hot-eared a spiritualist as any in Europe. He wrote and spoke continually upon the necessity of the most rigid asceticism as the chief factor in maintaining mental and bodily health, but he rarely refused an invitation to a banquet or dinner and never allowed a dish to pass him by. His threepenny pamphlet, *Water is Life*, had sold in millions; his cellar was reckoned the third best in Europe. These were, however, small matters, differing only in degree from the idiosyncrasies, the foibles, the puzzling contrasts, displayed in the lives of all his contemporaries. But what marked him out definitely as a pariah as far as the society of his equals was concerned was the blazing effrontery of what was vulgarly known as Ferrars’s Circus. Effrontery it would have been in

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anyone, but what was there left to be said of a man who, having written *Monogamy the Basic Norm and Fallacy of the Necessity of Sexual Practice*, parades before the world four “wives” and seventeen children. Had not criticism been struck dumb through sheer inadequacy of expression its voice must surely have risen in shrill indignation at the added fact that one of the “wives” had been the wife of a colleague and another the six-months’ bride of his chauffeur.

Physically he carried it off. To the eyes of young Sidney he had of course appeared as some hairy, striding colossus, but in any crowd of men he would have stood out as bodily significant. He was slightly over six feet, square-shouldered, flat-backed, upright, and his body so finely and supplely muscled that he was constantly being asked for the name of the artist who

tailored him — that artist's name was legion, for Ferrars bought most of his clothes ready-made from any convenient store. His hands and feet were long and fine and in his less excitable moments his carriage was that of an athlete. Bushy black eyebrows, bright deep-set eyes, a once aquiline nose which had been broken in a youthful brawl and a wide red-lipped mouth with strong teeth the colour of old ivory made up, with his mop of curly black hair and immense black curly beard, a picture difficult to forget.

Many men and many women disliked him almost to the point of repulsion, but an equal number of the two sexes fell quickly under the influence of his intensely vital and at times alarmingly fascinating personality.

His voice was his greatest handicap and on a first meeting undoubtedly made the worst of him. To its deep booming sonority there was added a harsh overtone that grated upon any ear not entirely tone deaf.

And upon the very day that Stoker Sidney Larkins, aged twenty, left his depot at Chatham to join the new and wonderful naval submarine Q.I., lying in Southampton Water and preparing for its spectacular trial trip in three weeks' time, Ferrars's dramatic announcement appeared in the correspondence columns of some of the British daily papers.

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The Q.I. was a submarine of an entirely new type and was intended as a troop transport. It carried no offensive or defensive armament of any sort, was driven by four Baker-Manning engines, each of 10,000 h.p., was scheduled to reach a surface speed of fifty knots and a submerged one of thirty-five, and provided ample accommodation for an infantry battalion and all its equipment. Sir Revel Helston, its designer, confidently predicted surface and submerged speeds far in excess of the schedule.

Its trial trip was to begin on July the Third and a host of celebrities, official and lay, had been invited to make the three or four days' trip.

Sidney at twenty was, although of average height and build, somehow physically insignificant. This may have been due to the light colour of his hair, the paleness of his complexion, the smallness of his nose and chin, and his disconcerting trick of dropping his glance when addressed or when addressing others.

The characteristic traits of his boyhood remained with him unchanged, the three years he had spent in the Royal Navy having if anything rather intensified than diminished the less admirable ones to the detriment of

those others in which he might perhaps have discovered some source of pride.

He may best be comprehended at this period by his reactions to the information that he had been drafted into the submarine service. He considered in turn suicide, desertion and an appeal to the naval surgeon of his depôt ship for exemption on the grounds of physical unfitness. He lay awake for part of several successive nights inventing symptoms of the type of his cock-and-bull yarns to avoid battle during his schooldays. He even looked up various diseases in an odd volume of an old medical encyclopædia belonging to one of his messmates who, unaware of his motives, warned him against reading such stuff, humorously suggesting that as it was a cheap-jack affair he'd probably die of a misprint. The volume only went as far as Bel and as the most promising diseases that Sid knew began with C, S, or R, he abandoned that line of campaign and surrendered himself to the inevitable. He received without any

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lessening of his fears or any sign of pleasurable anticipation, the further information that he had been allocated to Q.I. as one of the nucleus crew and would probably be a humble sharer in the historic trial trip.

Professor Digby Ferrars's dramatic announcement appeared in three British morning newspapers on June the second. It was in the form of a letter to the editor and had been sent to every morning journal of importance in the British Isles. It was commendably brief and ran:

“DEAR SIR, — Three days ago I annihilated an atom of helium. — Your obedient servant,

“A. DIGBY FERRARS, D.SC., LL.D.,” etc.

It is a striking commentary upon Ferrars's dubious reputation that only three newspapers printed the letter: the London *Daily Courier*, the Glasgow *Morning Advertiser* and the Birmingham *Herald*.

The next morning the *Courier* alone of the three referred again to the matter, but that reference, consisting as it did of a column interview with Ferrars, was sufficient — the *Courier* circulation being nearly two millions — to make the public at least aware that something unusual had quite likely happened, even if it did eventually turn out to be no more than a silly-season topic.

Ferrars, who was then in occupation of a large isolated old country house in Sussex, did not so much grant an interview as deliver a lecture. He had in actual fact said to the *Courier* representative, "Young man, do you write shorthand?" That question receiving a satisfactory reply, Ferrars went on, "Then take down this and when I've finished type it out over in that corner and let me see the typescript. Want to smoke? All right; but you'll have to smoke my cigarettes. I can't stand the stench of any others. Ready? Well, go ahead."

There were nine paragraphs in the *Courier's* column "interview," but only four of these had been dictated by Ferrars, the others consisting of biographical details, a bibliography of

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Ferrars's works and a pastoral paragraph of local colour with something about Thomas Hardy, Wessex, Kipling and Burwash.

Ferrars's quite brief lecture began with the striking sentence: *To-day all the laws of physics are obsolete* and ended with the no less striking one: *Matter is destructible*. Between these two sentences were a not too-lucid explanation of what the fact of the destructibility of matter meant in terms of everyday life, an even less lucid hint of the possibilities of vast energy released by such annihilation, and a description of the damage done to the laboratory at the moment of the experiment's success. The damage was in fact considerable, most of the roof, all the window frames, the three doors and one of the walls having been destroyed. But undoubtedly the one paragraph of the four which did grip the imagination of its readers was the penultimate one. It was very short. *The violent thunderstorm, it read, which broke over this village and the surrounding countryside at three-fifteen p.m. last Tuesday, destroying a number of trees, haystacks and small buildings and flooding the villages of Bassett, Mowbray and Tettington was, strictly speaking, not a thunderstorm at all — certainly not a natural thunderstorm. It was due to, and was entirely caused by, the annihilation of an atom of helium in my laboratory.*

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CHAPTER VI

THE BOMBSHELL A DAMP SQUIB

APART from the *Courier* interview the British Press (with one other exception) ignored Ferrars's announcement. The London correspondent of The New York *Gazette* cabled a *résumé* of the interview to his paper, but it was cut to a few lines and was scarcely noticed on its appearance.

The other exception in England was *The Morning Mail*, an independent organ entirely owned and controlled by Jacob Spillman, the biscuit manufacturer. Spillman, a rigid nonconformist of extreme intolerance, pursued an unusual policy of insisting upon all the members of his staff being of his own religious and political denominations. This, at a time when the offices of the most Conservative organs housed as many Communists as the Socialist dailies housed Tories, was in itself sufficiently remarkable; but more remarkable still was the fact that Spillman invariably wrote *The Morning Mail's* first leader. This had frequently been a source of some embarrassment to the editor, but on the morning of June the fifth it was more than merely embarrassing. The previous morning's leader was headed: *Pestilential Nonsense*, and under the cloak of an exposure of Ferrars's claims attacked his private life and quasi-private activities.

Ferrars's name was not mentioned nor his specific claim to have annihilated an atom of helium, but it was offensively clear to whom the leader referred. "We have never," it ran, "subscribed to the sophistry that a dirty mouth can deliver a clean message. A priest who is an evil liver soils and pollutes the word of God, and claims put forward by men of 'science' whose lives

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are festering sores and a reproach to the long-suffering community which harbours them simply demand from decent men and women the treatment one gives to ordure of all kinds. There are books so obscene, so scabrous, that it is necessary to handle them with tongs in order to burn them; unfortunately no such implement and no such cleansing and obliterating fire may be employed in dealing with men whose lives are an offence to humanity." And so on from one scurrility to another for three-quarters of a column. It was so outrageously libellous that *The Mail's* solicitors rang up

Penton, the editor, to point out that they'd be lucky to get out of it under ten thousand pounds. Penton referred them to the proprietor and went on with his work.

But Ferrars was not the man to let his anger wait upon legal process. A big scarlet limousine drew up outside *The Mail* offices at eleven o'clock on the morning following the appearance of the leading article and Ferrars jumped out and strode up the stairs leading to Penton's office. He was wearing khaki shorts and shirt, an alpaca jacket and a pith helmet. He brushed aside in turn an office-boy, two reporters and a sub-editor and entered Penton's big room unannounced.

Penton, a small mild-mannered man, looked up from his chair as Ferrars stalked in, slammed the door behind him, sat down uninvited and announced in his harsh booming voice, "I'm Ferrars."

"Yes. Good-morning, Professor Ferrars."

"Did you write that rhapsody?"

"I'm the editor of *The Morning Mail*, Professor Ferrars."

"You mean you wrote it."

"I mean I'm the editor."

"Responsible, and so on, eh? I follow you. Well, I'm sorry you're such a little pip. *You* don't follow, apparently. Let me be clear. I'd hoped to find someone round about fourteen stone — my own weight. I can't fight a bantam. You'll have to go over the desk. I shall take your trousers down and smack your posterior. No other way out, I'm afraid, unless you can suggest something."

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"I suggest you run along. I'm a busy man. I can only give you another minute."

"Sublime!" with a roar of laughter. "Amazing a man of your calibre could have written such trash. Why, my dear little man, the thing was littered with nonsequiturs, positively littered."

"Your time's up, Professor Ferrars. Sorry to seem discourteous, but I must ask you to go. As I've said I'm a——"

Ferrars's great hand shot suddenly over the desk and dragged Penton out of his chair. He stood up and, holding the editor down among a litter of copy, printers' slips, ink-bottles, and a desk telephone proceeded to carry out his threat, *au fond de la lettre*, as he described it later with some aptness.

In the middle of the smacking the door opened and a commissioner entered. He was a big strong fellow and came in with a rush. This was an affair much more to Ferrars's taste and, pushing Penton over the desk into his chair, he caught the commissioner flush on the jaw with a swing and toppled him over. By the time the man was on his feet again some half dozen of the staff had entered and Ferrars was engaged in a *mêlée* which upset furniture, smashed pictures and the glass doors of bookcases and ended in a wild closely packed scrum on the landing and down the stairs into the street.

Had not Spillman himself turned up a few moments after Ferrars had driven triumphantly away minus his alpaca jacket and pith helmet and bearing plain facial evidence of the affray, the matter might have been allowed to drop. Penton certainly desired no publicity. But Spillman, in a white, almost sick, fury, would not hear of leaving the thing as it was and in consequence two mornings later, Ferrars appeared before Mr. Quinn, the Blair Street magistrate, to answer a summons for assault and battery and wilful and malicious damage.

Quinn was a bad-tempered octogenarian, bigoted, intolerant, provincial and puritanical. The police knew him as Old Quinine.

Ferrars conducted his own case with a demeanour so blatantly and aggressively cheerful that Quinn snapped at him that he

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must behave with decorum and decency "here, if you can't elsewhere."

"That's prejudicing the case before you've heard the evidence," observed Ferrars blandly.

All the witnesses having given evidence, Quinn was misguided enough to attempt to superimpose upon the fine of twenty guineas and twenty guineas costs plus damage, one of the senile homilies for which he was notorious. He had not achieved two foolish sentences when Ferrars interrupted suavely, "Hold your tongue."

Quinn obeyed. Sheer startled amazement permitted no other course. And before he could recover himself sufficiently to resume Ferrars went on, "You exceed your duties, sir. But don't presume upon my forbearance. During these proceedings you have permitted yourself several times the irrelevant remark that you have heard of my notorious reputation. May I now permit myself the *tu quoque*. Since you also allowed yourself to say that I was a danger to the community I shall assume an equal freedom and

point out that you have long been a menace to public safety, that you are a crassly stupid old man and the conduct of your court is a grave reproach to a community of civilised adults. For your court, *qua court*, I have the utmost respect.”

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Ferrars, by temperament and by long years of self-schooling, was as indifferent to public opinion and to hostile criticism as it is possible for a human creature to be, and ignoring the jocose titterings of the cheap Press (which had suddenly decided that he was first-rate humorous copy) he set himself to gain the ear of no less a person than the Prime Minister. The Premier, Sir Henry Caxton-Perseval, was a man of immaculate public and private life. From his earliest schooldays he had trodden none but straight and narrow paths, for the simple reason that they appealed to his quiet temperament far more than the broader, gayer and more adventurous ones. He was respected and trusted. He certainly inspired no warmer feelings,

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but the public felt that it had had a sufficiency of forceful personalities and spell-binding orators and, content to leave matters in his dull but safe keeping, had voted his party solidly into power for the last four elections.

To Ferrars's first letter asking for an interview, Sir Henry's private secretary replied that the Prime Minister thanked him for his letter but could not see that any useful purpose would be served by such an interview and must therefore regretfully refuse to accede to the request. Two further letters received a similar reply. By the time the fourth arrived, however, Sir Henry had apparently discussed the subject with some of his colleagues and certainly, as was known later, with Professor James Hayter, the President of the Royal Society. However that may have been, something had undoubtedly occurred to cause a change of front on the Prime Minister's part and on June the fourteenth Ferrars received a short note asking him to call at No. 10 Downing Street at eleven a.m. the next day.

The two men met in the small room of Sir Henry's confidential secretary, that lady, at the Premier's desire, retiring and leaving them alone together.

“My dear Prime Minister,” began Ferrars expansively, “this is extremely kind of you and, if I may say so, extremely wise.”

Sir Henry slightly nodded his small sleek grey head, but made no other acknowledgment and no comment.

“You will be aware, of course,” continued Ferrars, “if not from the Press or from other sources of information, then from my letters, that I have successfully carried out in my own laboratory an experiment hitherto believed impossible. So impossible in fact that the whole of modern physics is built upon the assumption that what I have done *cannot* be done. In physics the world now begins again at A. But that is just now beside the point. The annihilation of the atom releases energy on a scale only comparable to that emitted by the sun. At present that energy on release is rather like a bull in a china shop, but its control is by no means an insuperable difficulty and can quite confidently be predicted as something which will be achieved within, a year or so. Possessing the secret of that power means

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the control of the world. It is no more flamboyant turgidity to say that who holds it runs the earth. Now I propose to put that vast power at the service of the British Empire.”

“The proposal does credit to you, Professor Ferrars, both as a man of science and an Englishman.”

“At a price, my dear Prime Minister.”

“I beg your pardon,” stiffening and frowning slightly.

“For a *quid pro quo*, shall we say?” blandly.

“You mean you would sell that power to your country — not give it?”

“Of course. That is the usual thing. I was a mere youth during the Great War, but I gathered that the only people who gave anything were the men who died. The rest all received payment, from the inventor of bombs to the investor in loans.”

“An excusable error for youth, but hardly one I should expect you to make. It is quite untrue. Thousands gave everything, or nearly everything. Indeed, had not men of your own profession given unstintingly of their time, their skill, their inventiveness, their very health, the victory could not have been won. Moreover, what has always seemed to me, Professor, one of the greatest and finest things about men of science is their willingness to give their discoveries to humanity.”

“And mess along, in old age, harassed by poverty,” smiled Ferrars. “That, my dear Prime Minister, does not seem to me a great or a fine thing,

but a vastly idiotic one and one further that is grossly unfair to their dependents. But that also is not quite relevant. I am in any case not so foolish. I have something to sell. It is of the utmost value. I require a fair price for it.”

“Possibly,” observed Sir Henry drily, “you, as is the way of sellers, tend to overestimate the value of your — er — goods.” He failed, or did not try, to keep a faint tinge of contempt from his tone. “I am given to understand that the whole matter of this vast power is problematical — very much so.”

“If you were given to understand that,” very amiably, “then your informant is a nincompoop. Why, good Lord!” with a great laugh, “a trifling error in my calculations the other day

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wrecked my house and devastated the countryside over an area of ten square miles. Does that look——”

“That devastation has been ascribed to more natural causes,” interrupted Sir Henry. “And——”

“Oh, of course,” impatiently, but with great good humour, “and conversely the last trump will be ascribed by some ass to a local explosion. Put all such nonsense out of your head, Sir Henry. Briefly, I have the goods; will you buy them? A further demonstration can of course be arranged.”

“Whatever my own private view may be you forget that I am merely a servant of the public and have no control over the national purse.”

“We won’t argue that very controversial point, my dear Prime Minister. I shall be perfectly satisfied if I have your agreement to buy. Matters of detail can be left to the officials concerned. Now are you prepared to purchase?”

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders. “What is your price?”

“Good. A life pension of fifty thousand a year. A lump sum of half-a-million. An earldom. And finally, the legitimising of my seventeen children and my four wives.”

The Premier stared at Ferrars in frank stupefaction. A flush slowly mounted in his face. He found some difficulty in collecting himself. Finally he managed to say sharply, “I’m afraid I have misunderstood you, Professor.”

“I’m sorry. A life pension of——”

“I heard it. Is it your intention seriously to repeat that?”

“Good Lord, yes!”

Sir Henry glanced at his wrist. "I am afraid, Professor Ferrars, that I have an important meeting to attend at eleven-thirty and must therefore beg you to excuse me."

"You mean," flushing slightly, "that you refuse my offer?"

"It is not a question of refusal or acceptance," angrily. "Your offer is quite unworthy of consideration. It is grossly insulting — an insult flung in the face of the whole nation." Rising, "I must remind you, Professor Ferrars, that the interview is at an end."

"But, Good Lord! Why, what in the name of thunder's bitten

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you, man! What are you boggling at? Look here, sit down and let's thrash this out. I'll not say half a million is my last——"

The door opened quietly and a young man stood there waiting.

"Show Professor Ferrars out, please, Mason. Good-morning, Professor, and thank you."

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Ferrars spent most of the next ten days endeavouring, without success, to obtain interviews with prominent members of the government in France, Germany, Italy and the United States. He even undertook a non-stop solo flight from Croydon to Washington in a vain last-minute endeavour to obtain an interview with President Verney. His record time of eleven hours nine minutes for the outward journey would have brought any other man at least a day's fame, but it was allowed to pass by the Press with the barest of notice.

He returned to England on June the twenty-fourth and on the twenty-fifth he issued his *Manifesto to the World*. Only *The Daily Courier* in England, *The New York Gazette* in America and *L'Echo* in France published it in full. The rest of the world's Press either ignored it or published garbled extracts as comic items. On the matter of his abortive interview with the British Premier Ferrars had observed his customary indiscretion and some of the less responsible papers abroad printed alleged verbatim accounts of the interview, with Ferrars's demands grotesquely exaggerated. The *Ohio Eagle* had a streamer across its centre page: *England's Comic Scientist Demands Heaven and Earth*, and underneath a fake interview with Sir Henry Caxton-Perseval gave Ferrars's terms:

- (a) The dictatorship of Great Britain and her colonies with a salary of a million a year.
- (b) Return of the English Church to Rome.
- (c) Abolition of all hereditary titles.
- (d) Polygamy to be optional.
- (e) Polyandry to be a capital offence.

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Ferrars's *Manifesto to the World* ran as follows:

“To all thoughtful men and women of the earth, greeting. Whenever in humanity's slow and painful progress towards perfection an opportunity has arisen to accelerate that progress there have never been wanting men to bar the way with every obstacle, material and immaterial, upon which they could lay their hands, from lies and calumny to imprisonment, torture and death. And always these men who have stood menacingly astride the path of progress have been high in the service of either church or state. To achieve their ends no action has been too vile. The pages of history are black with their infamies.

“I have offered to the governments of the world a power that relegates all other power to the level of a child's plaything. That offer has not merely been refused — it has been spurned with every mark of contempt, of ridicule, of vilification, and of unbelief. Unbelief: a flat and brutal denial of my integrity as a man of science. The proof I have already given of the new power I am ready to offer to humanity has been laughed at, challenged and repudiated. Even those who, not unaware of my just claims to a hearing as a man of science, *dare* not entirely ignore that proof, have whittled it away to a mere pop-gun explosion.

“There remains then no other course open to me but a further and more spectacular demonstration. On July the Fourth I shall annihilate simultaneously atoms of the following elements. I give them here in ascending order of atomic weight: Hydrogen, carbon, magnesium, potassium, chromium, strontium, antimony, barium, mercury and uranium.

“The date is well chosen. Nearly two hundred years ago, upon July the Fourth, the American States declared themselves free and independent and absolved from all allegiance to Great Britain. Upon this July the Fourth humanity will become aware that for the first time in human history it

stands upon the threshold of a new life, a life in which it shall be free from poverty and want, independent of the vagaries of nature or the

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schemings of little soulless men, absolved from the burden of monotonous labour and aimless toil.

“All this I have already offered to the world, but the world, by the mouths of its spokesmen, has rejected me. I have waited in the anterooms of the great and have been turned away unheard. It ill becomes no man to be a suppliant when he pleads for others and he can face rebuff without loss of self-respect. But not forever. A point is reached when further pleading is equivalent to surrender. I have reached that point. There remains now only action. At noon, therefore, upon July the Fourth, I shall simultaneously destroy an atom of ten different elements. The energy released will be colossal. I choose that word in preference to all others as the just one. For an hour or more after the moment of annihilation storms of unprecedented (again I select that word from all others) violence will rage over the British Isles, probably over a greater part of Europe and America and possibly as far afield as the Antipodes. The air to a height of twenty miles will be shatteringly disturbed and aircraft are hereby advised to avoid flight during that hour.

“It has become lamentably apparent to me during the last few months that to-day, as always throughout history, only by violent methods may humanity’s self-styled leaders be moved. Those violent methods I now propose to put into operation.”

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CHAPTER VII

BUT THE SQUIB EXPLODES

DURING the week or so following the manifesto, a section of the public in most parts of the world extracted a good deal of mild fun out of it. It figured widely in vaudeville gags, as an extra verse to topical numbers, and achieved cartoons in *Life*, *Simplicissimus*, *Le Rire*, *Figaro* and *Punch*. The *Punch* cartoon was a boxing one, showing Battling Atlas being knocked out by Kid Ferrars, with the dropped globe shattered to pieces beside the supine giant.

Amidst this spate of facetiousness there was one serious note in the form of a letter to *The Times* over the signature of Professor James Hayter, President of the Royal Society. A letter from Hayter, a man of world-wide repute and absolute integrity could not be ignored, and *The Times* printed it in *extenso* without comment. It ran:

“The Editor of *The Times*.

“SIR, — I write this letter with great reluctance and only after long and serious consideration. While desiring to avoid ministering in any way to the popular passion for sensationalism I feel bound to point out to the public here and abroad the extreme gravity of the position in regard to the claim of Professor Digby Ferrars to have annihilated an atom of helium and his published intention of attempting on July the Fourth to annihilate atoms of ten other elements.

“The publicity already given to the matter is, in my opinion, extremely regrettable; but that Professor Ferrars’s claim and intention should alike be treated with irresponsible levity tends to the disastrous.

“The public either forgets, wilfully ignores, or is ignorant of

facts well known to men of science the world over: those facts are that Professor Ferrars has to his credit achievements in pure and applied physics of which any man and any country might well be proud. I will not trespass so much upon your valuable space as to tabulate fully all these achievements, but I must point out that several of Professor Ferrars’s hypotheses have now been generally accepted as sound theories and likely

within the next few years to pass into laws. I cite his *Relativity and Radiation* and his *Ratio of Ascending Stratospheric Temperature* as two examples. Further, and this should touch the public more nearly, we owe to Professor Ferrars the Ferrars Televisor, the Ferrars Recorder, the Ferrars-Watkins screen which has revolutionised X-ray work, and a half-a-dozen other inventions to which the world owes much in the way of comfort, pleasure and added security. On the point of security I need only mention that it is generally agreed in aviation circles that his robot-balance, as it is popularly called, has made flying the safest of all modes of locomotion.

“Are these achievements, sir, those of a man whose claims merit only ridicule? With the fullest sense of what my words imply I affirm that a continuance of such folly upon the part of our responsible statesmen is likely to be attended by consequences of the utmost gravity. To this I will return in a moment.

“It is perhaps presumptuous of me to point out that a man of science should be judged solely by his work for science. It has become a tradition to accept the work of artists of all kinds, to return thanks for it, and to ignore matters which no more affect the value of that work than dust affects the value of a painting or a stain affects the tone of a Stradivarius. It would be invidious to say more in this regard.

“It has been charged against Professor Ferrars that by demanding a price for his work he has transgressed the unwritten laws or customs of his profession. That is not a matter upon which I am qualified to speak or justified in discussing. It is entirely a matter for Professor Ferrars.

“With all the authority which my position as President of

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the Royal Society endows me for the brief time I occupy that great and honourable post, I counsel this country to accept Professor Ferrars's demands, however great the price that must be paid. Officially, I know nothing of these demands, but in common with the majority of the public, I have a rough notion of what they are. Even if they were everything that the most distorted and exaggerated rumours allege them to be, they would be but a small price to pay. For unless that price be paid humanity may have lived in vain. This is no alarmist statement. I solemnly warn the world that I may have to face on July the Fourth not a mere matter of violent and unprecedented storms but a world catastrophe which may end human life upon this planet.

“By the simultaneous annihilation of the atoms of ten elements so vast a release of energy may occur that it is impossible to forecast the effect upon the globe. Let me suggest two quite probable results: the earth may be flung out of its orbit and driven either into outer space to perish by cold, or into the sun to perish by fire. A more probable result is the stopping dead of the world in its tracks, its revolution upon its axis, its motion in its orbit round the sun, and its drift through space all abruptly halted; this briefly would mean that everything upon the earth, including the oceans and air, would be hurled into space. There are a dozen other possibilities with which I cannot now deal.

“This is not a time for quibbling or argument. Professor Ferrars’s price, whatever it may be, should be paid, and he should then be asked to lay his work before a committee comprised of his fellow scientists all over the world.

“Failing this, and I say it with the fullest knowledge of all it implies, Professor Ferrars should be forcibly restrained from carrying out his project and this restraint must be continued until he agrees to place his dangerous secret in safe hands. If this should entail a life long incarceration of Professor Ferrars it must nevertheless be undertaken. It again becomes expedient, and I write this with all reverence, that one man should die for the people.

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“Before humanity there stretches at least another million years of life upon this planet. The people of the earth are only at the beginning of a road that leads to splendours as yet undreamed. Are we for the sake of a few millions of money, for a few prejudices (prejudices which in the course of time humanity will inevitably of its own free will cast aside) for a mere formula, to rob humanity of its mighty heritage, to fling Almighty God’s inestimable gift back in His face?

“I implore the responsible statesmen of the world to act before action is too late. And if that plea fail I implore Professor Ferrars to give way. That capitulation will become him better than the greatest achievement. His fellow men of science will accord him immediate and deep-felt gratitude. The gratitude of the world may be delayed but its ultimate advent is inevitable and will be as generously accorded. — I am sir, etc.,

“JAMES NOEL HAYTER,
“President of the Royal Society.”

It is a saddening if ironical commentary upon scientific achievement that this gravely considered and plainly written statement of possible eventualities from the pen of a most distinguished man of science should have completely failed in its object.

As far as the main body of public opinion was concerned, it was received with a light indifference that bordered upon flippancy. The generation now adult had grown up during a period when few weeks passed without some new claim of science clamouring for its attention. Astronomers of world-wide repute promulgated with almost mensural regularity new and revolutionary hypotheses of time and space, each more striking than its predecessor and, more to the point, flatly contradictory. Geologists pushed further and further back into time the age of the world and mathematicians, astronomers and geologists alike juggled with meaningless figures and quarrelled over such controversial issues as the duration of life upon the planet or the fate of the sun. Lunar and inter-planetary rockets were invented (on paper), discussed, quarrelled over

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and forgotten until the latest and newest inventor resuscitated them. Nor did chemistry and medicine lag behind in the wild race for public attention. New drugs of limitless potentialities, new methods of anæsthesia, new serums that cured or gave immunity, magnetic probes, rotary scalpels and a host of other marvels offered heavens of ease to the sick and suffering. And quackery was not idle. Daily through the columns of the world's newspapers it promised with abashless effrontery to perform the impossible, nor did it hesitate, in cunningly-worded guarantees (vetted by solicitors) to offer huge sums should it fail. And while the men of science and the charlatans shouted their wares with equal obstreperousness the churches cleared their trumpets and blew blasts of authentic miracle, beside which the efforts of their competitors were but the twitterings of birds in a thunderstorm. Famous shrines multiplied and improved their miracles to a point which balked only at raising the dead. But where orthodox Christianity balked Spiritualism leapt joyously into the breach and if it did not corporeally reanimate the dead, it prevented their departure to other spheres long enough to give a detailed description of the passage through the dark valley; nor did it find any difficulty in persuading Charon to ferry back again the souls of long-departed eminence to deliver homilies and to

enunciate spiritual and scientific truths which neither religion nor science could hope to parallel.

And so, satiated from its too rich diet of sensationalism, the public turned away with weary indifference from the dish offered by the President of the Royal Society. Perhaps had plainer fare been offered it might have stayed to taste. But the day of plain fare was gone beyond recall. To change the metaphor, the seed scattered by the President did not fall upon stony ground; rather was it blown to the four corners of heaven by the rough wind of scepticism.

Excusable as was the public's reception of Professor Hayter's warning, it is difficult to understand how responsible statesmen in Britain and abroad failed to realise its tremendous importance and to act upon its advice. The best brains and the best

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counsel were at their service and full power was in their hands. The catastrophic possibilities suggested in Hayter's letter were never disputed, never even challenged, and would have been supported by most of Hayter's scientific contemporaries had they been consulted. No one was apparently approached in the matter at all. Hayter, interviewed a day or so after the publication of his letter, disclosed the fact that the Prime Minister had some three weeks previously written to him regarding the standing and *bona fides* of Ferrars. To this letter he had replied, but that was the sole communication that had passed between them.

There is of course the possibility, a faint one perhaps, that Sir Henry was so occupied with the much-boomed trial trip of the new Submarine Q.I. that he thrust everything else aside. His mentality was essentially simple; he was single-minded and single-purposed; to those virtues indeed he owed the reliance the public placed in him. There was quite a lot to be done about this trip and some of it he could not delegate to others. A crowd of very distinguished people was being invited and the compilation of this list was the Premier's own especial task, an extremely worrying and invidious one. Moreover, he was going himself and he retained at sixty, as men of his mental calibre often do, all a boy's capacity for restless if joyous excitement at the promise of new adventure — a condition of mind not conducive to calm judgment or considered action.

There may have been a dozen other explanations of Sir Henry's policy of *laissez aller*. All that matters is that no attempt was made to interfere

with Ferrars.

One point in Hayter's letter managed to strike a faintly responsive chord in the public mind, or rather an intermediary struck that chord and the public responded. But as that intermediary was a weekly journal of sensational tendencies edited by a notoriously shady financier, the response was rather amused than serious. This weekly, catching at Hayter's suggestion to imprison Ferrars, flooded the country over the

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week-end with its yellow placards bearing in red letters the admonition: *To the Gallows with Ferrars*. A page article within, written by the editor, mixed religion, science, patriotism and prudery into so sickly a stirabout of sentiment that his readers were left with a vaguely amused sense of mental nausea rather than with that determination to "do the right thing" which he had set out to instill into their hearts and minds.

The *Daily Courier* sent a man down to Sussex to ask Professor Ferrars if he had any observations to make on *The Times* letter, and *The Metropolitan News Agency* attempted to obtain an interview with the Prime Minister. Sir Henry refused to be interviewed, saying that as far as he and the government were concerned the matter was closed.

Ferrars was a little more communicative. Asked bluntly what he thought of Professor Hayter's letter, he said with a laugh, "Quite a nice unsolicited testimonial." Asked further what he would do if any attempt were made to put into force the President's suggestion regarding his person, he replied that he never bothered himself with suppositional questions. He then added good-humouredly, "But if your editor's curiosity insists upon being satisfied, why, you may say I should resist arrest with all the forces at my command."

"And they are, Professor?"

"Oh," laughing loudly, "everything short of artillery." And while they scratched their heads over *that* problem, he went on, "I should, with a certain amount of reluctance at the change of date, proceed to carry out my determination then and there."

"We may take it, then, that everything is ready for the experiment?"

"Everything is ready for the demonstration, young man. I'm not conducting experiments; I'm demonstrating accomplished facts. And now come into my garden and I'll show you something you've never seen

before — a green rose. Expert horticulturists (and there's no more pestiferous tribe than experts,

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young man) would call it yellow, whereas anyone with half an eye who's not an expert can see it's green. Shut the door behind you and mind those wires...."

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The much-advertised trial trip of Q.I. was to last about four or five days. The vessel was to leave Southampton Water about ten a.m. on July the third, proceed on the surface to Athens and return submerged. As she had a cruising range of twenty-thousand miles without refuelling and could stay under water over one hundred hours, maintaining a scheduled submerged speed of 38 knots, this was hardly in the nature of a rigid test. In point of fact, the trip was not an endurance test at all but had been arranged partly as a speed test, partly as a spectacular demonstration of the unassailable perfection of British underwater craft and partly, it must be confessed, to provide an original entertainment to a large gathering of people eminent in many different walks of life.

The vessel was under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Charles Brooking, the personnel numbered five other officers (including a surgeon), seventy petty officers, three wireless operators and thirty-eight ratings. Among the ratings was Sidney Larkins, who had joined the ship on June the twenty-eighth. Within two days of joining he had been several times reprimanded by Engineer-Lieutenant Bax for various minor offences and told a dozen times by the chief engine room artificer that he was a half-baked and hopelessly incompetent fool. Finally he had been cleared out of the engine room and put into the cook's galley of the men's mess for permanent duty.

Probably no such brilliant gathering of eminent men and women had ever before in history been gathered together in so small a space. Designed as Q.I. was to carry a full infantry battalion with stores and equipment the two hundred and sixteen guests found to their surprise that this newest marvel of British shipbuilding was almost as comfortable as a liner. Various members of the government went in their official

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capacities as cabinet ministers and these included the Premier, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Minister for War, the Home Secretary and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Among the guests were the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishops of Salcaster, Bastonbury and Oldcaster, the United States Ambassador, the French Minister of Marine, naval attaches from all the European embassies in London and a representative number of British and foreign men and women of science, letters, painting, sculpture and the theatre. Many of the men brought their wives and a few their daughters or other female relatives. Lord Sheldringham, the Home Secretary, had brought his niece, the beautiful Sylvia Lessing.

The surface scheduled speed of 50 knots had been far exceeded on the outward voyage and on the stretch from Land's End to C. Finisterre an average of 58 had been maintained with a maximum of 67. About ten minutes before noon (G.M.T.) on July the Fourth, Q.I., then some seventy miles due E. of C. Passero in Sicily, was attempting to touch 70 knots. It was a morning of blazing sunshine and most of the guests were on deck. With devastating suddenness the gay and beautiful scene changed to tragedy. Q.I. struck a mass of submerged wreckage, was badly holed and sank in less than thirty seconds, the crowd on deck being swept into the sea. The hatches and bulkheads closed automatically, but so much water had poured into her that she plunged headlong to the bottom, a depth of over one hundred and eighty fathoms.

Q.I. settled and came to rest. The lighting plant had been destroyed and the sixty or so survivors of the officers, crew and guests groped their way, aided by torches, towards the main troop-assembly chamber, which had escaped damage. There were few among them who did not realise that death was merely a matter of time, hours or days. Two of the engine-room crew were hastily rigging up a jury-light and Commander Brooking was about to attempt some reassuring words and to detail men to ascertain the extent of the damage and what slight chances there might be of using the escape apparatus when the vessel, as if seized by a giant hand, was

flung over on her side and then tilted on to her bow. And then began a terrifying ordeal which none of the survivors was able afterwards to describe with any clearness, nor even to hazard more than a dubious guess as to its duration. Q.I. was spun round and round like a top and over and over like a log hurtling down a steep incline. Those inside her hull were

tossed and flung about from side to side, from ceiling to floor, until unconsciousness brought the nightmare experience to an end.

BOOK TWO
CIRCUMSTANCE

CHAPTER I

“WOULD WE NOT SHATTER IT TO BITS ...”

SID’S consciousness struggled up from vast abysses of darkness. He lay still for long minutes with closed eyes. Presently, with painful slowness, he moved an arm, a leg, and then, turning his bruised body over, he opened his eyes. He lay upon a floor grotesquely tilted, his shoulders pressed against a curving wall. Through the rent and broken hull he saw immense black clouds hurtling by overhead driven by a screaming pandemonium of wind. It was stiflingly hot. Each gasping breath he drew racked his chest with pain. It was neither light nor dark, but a strange glowing twilight. He saw things through a red misty luminousness that made his eyeballs throb and burn. His face and lips felt wet and sticky and, putting up his hand, he found blood oozing slowly from his nose and ears.

Suddenly the black clouds uncovered the sun and he cried out at its scorching heat and dragged himself into the shadow of an overhanging sheet of metal flapping like paper in the gale. He lay still for a while, the taste of his mouth acrid with fumes, his head aching, his eyeballs straining and tightening as if they were bursting, his whole body wretched with dull half-felt pain. He found himself completely unable to guess what had happened to him. He tried to force his mind to think, to remember, to make some reasonable explanation of this nightmare but he abandoned the struggle. He believed himself dying. A new wrack of inky clouds rushed across the sun and again he stared through smarting eyes into a pink misty twilight. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

And while he slept, here and there in the shattered hull of

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Q.I. others woke and stretched painful arms and legs, dragged over racked bodies, sat up, bleeding from eyes and ears and nostrils and gasped for breath in the hot, stifling, rarefied air.

Without the broken vessel the gale screamed and howled, driving across the heavens at frightening speed the clouds of black smoke from Etna, Stromboli and Vesuvius in violent eruption.

All over the shattered earth volcanoes, live and long since extinct, were in eruption, belching out smoke, flame, steam and lava. To those recovering

consciousness one by one and peering painfully through jagged holes or between smashed and twisted plates it seemed as if the fiery terrors of the Apocalypse were being loosed upon the earth.

Sid stirred painfully in his troubled sleep, felt a hand shaking him roughly, opened his eyes, blinked at the dazzling sunshine, closed them abruptly and was drifting back into sleep when he was violently shaken and a voice bawled, "Show a leg, Slushy; you're not dead yet." He stared into the grimy blood-smeared face of able-seaman Ted ("Nobby") Clark, sat up swiftly, licked his parched lips and said in a dry croak, "What's up? Where are we? What's——"

"Stow it! Gawd knows. Find out presently. In 'ell if you ask me. Get up and put a jerk in it. The Old Man's rorting round as spry as a two-year-old. Wants all hands not dead on deck. Officers too and the nobs if any. So skin along, mate, and if you can't walk, crawl."

Ten minutes or so later Sid found himself one of a group of the dirtiest, most dishevelled and most wretched human beings he had ever seen. Over the broken remains of the bridge an awning had been rigged up against the burning sun and a little apart from the rest stood Lieutenant-Commander Charles Brooking. He alone retained some semblance of his habitual spick-and-spanness. Of that small crowd under the awning, all were suffering from hurts more or less serious. Three men died that day and two others the day following. Those who finally survived and had to face a new and amazing life, numbered twenty, and included but one woman — Sylvia Lessing, the

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niece of the Home Secretary, Lord Sheldringham, who also survived.

Sylvia Lessing had three years previously been the loveliest débutante of the season, the loveliest of any season, Audubon, the famous society painter, had declared. She was tall, slim and fair with honey-coloured hair and a vivid red mouth. She was a thoroughbred. There was about her a faintly languorous insolence of bearing that seemed to become her even better than her beauty. She was twenty-two years of age, a fine horse-woman, could drive any car and had flown her own aeroplane. It had taken nature several million years to make her; she looked well worth the time and trouble.

Sheldringham was that rather small, dapper, perfectly groomed and tailored type of aristocrat that seems so common upon club committees and

boards of directors. He was fifty-eight years of age. Except for an almost knife-edged aquiline nose his features were unobtrusive. There was a sort of bloodless translucence about his pale face, which strange effect was heightened by a frail, wan, drooping moustache part sandy, part grey, large, slightly protruding pale blue eyes, bushy eyebrows and thin sleek hair of the same colour as his moustache. He spoke with more than the suspicion of a drawl.

Lieutenant-Commander Charles Brooking was forty. He was dark, stockily-built, his face sallow and rather full with a fleshy nose, a tight mouth and a broad blunt chin. His education had been confined to a secondary school, which he had left during the war at the age of seventeen to join the Royal Navy. Singular abilities and distinguished conduct had earned him a commission before he was twenty-one. The command of Q.I. was the first plum of a dishearteningly disappointing career. He ascribed his slow promotion to his lack of a school and the years of bitterness had soured him. His father had been a policeman.

Engineer-Lieutenant Richard Seppings, aged thirty, was an old Winchester boy. He was tall, fair, bronzed, good looking. He was perhaps rather too good looking in a way that would have become a West-end junior lead better than a naval officer.

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He was good humoured, good natured and completely reckless of the safety of his own person. He confronted the world with an almost habitual faint smile that seemed equally ascribable to amusement, tolerance or boredom.

Dr. Raymond Stiles, Bishop of Oldcaster, was a big, dark, booming, fleshy man of fifty. Although in the Church preferment was so often a matter of girth rather than worth Dr. Stiles had considerable innate shrewdness which his life from twenty to forty-five had tended to destroy and had certainly succeeded in so covering it up under layer after layer of acquired artificialities, humbugs and shibboleths that the topmost stratum, the one exposed to the world, bore scant resemblance to the basic one which was his real self. An old Harborne boy, he had gone back to his school as form master after leaving Oxford. Eight years later he went to Bellingham as house master and at thirty-seven returned to Harborne as headmaster. Four years later he was appointed to the ancient bishopric of Oldcaster. It was these twenty years of schoolmastering which had disguised the natural man in him so that about all his associations with the

adult world there was a touch of tolerant patronage queerly mingled with a fretting sense of inferior virility.

Sir Henry Musgrave, First Lord of The Admiralty, was a man of the people. Educated at an elementary school, he had at fourteen gone as office boy into a shipping office. From that stage in his career his upward march had been rapid and continuous. He never experienced a setback and at forty-two, when managing director of his company, he had entered Parliament as Conservative member for Hants. Three years later he became Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and after the next election he was given a baronetcy and the post of First Lord of The Admiralty. He was now fifty-one, a stout, heavy man of medium height, bald, with a large florid face, big wholesome-looking nose, mouth and chin, a full set of strong natural teeth and small bright twinkling eyes. His hands were the worst part of him — short, red, hairy, coarse and stubby-fingered. His voice was low, with a sort of over-rich softness

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and except in moments of intense excitement showed no traces of the Cockney speech which had tended to handicap his early career.

Aubrey Delamere, Actor-Manager and lessee of St. Edmund's Theatre, London, was, although quite unaware of it, a victim of giantism. He was no more than six feet in height but his immense hands and feet, an immense egotism and an immense fretting envy of his peers revealed the taint. Above a mobile mouth, his features were fine and handsome, a Grecian nose, darkly luminous eyes and a head of black bushy curls. But below the mouth his fleshy protruding underlip and full rounded fat chin verged on the repellent. He was a fine actor in melodramatic parts. Dull-witted and stupid, a good memory and a quick tongue had given him a reputation as a witty conversationalist comparable, he himself believed, to that of Wilde or Whistler. He was forty, but looked ten years older. He spoke in a low, deep bass.

Arnold Hoople, the distinguished novelist, a man of forty-six, was then at the height of his powers and his reputation. He was a short, ugly, spare man with extraordinarily irregular features, a shock of stiff, upstanding, black hair, a sallow round face, blue jowled and chinned, however closely he shaved. His voice was piping and reedy and he turned his feet in rather ludicrously when walking.

Chief-Petty Officer John Flagg would in civilian clothes have passed anywhere for a prosperous farmer. He was forty, dark, of middle height and muscularly of great strength. He was the most physically powerful among the survivors.

The eleven surviving men of the crew were all, with the exception of Sid, in the early thirties. Fred Archer was a short, broad, fair, slow-speaking Suffolk man. Joseph Dixon, Michael Scott, Samuel Wells and Ted Clark were Cockneys of average size and appearance. David Ferguson was a little sandy-haired lowland Scot; Evan Jones a dark, stocky Welshman; John Priestly and Walter Fish big, dark, raw-boned, taciturn Cornishmen, and Reuben Levinsky a short, thin Liverpool Jew.

It was only a few hours after dawn on July the fifth of what

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later on they came to call the Year One. Even at that hour the sun was almost unbearably hot. It shone down blindingly from a cloudless sapphire sky upon a scene of incredible havoc. Q.I., smashed, shattered and twisted, lay over on her side at an angle which rendered difficult a comfortable foothold upon her deck and the members of the small crowd leaned against one another for support or clutched at the ends of hanging rails and wires. The air, still painfully rarefied, was unstirred by the faintest breeze. Around the vessel the ocean bed, grey with volcanic dust, stripped bare to the rock, stretched in a vast wilderness to the far edges of the horizon. The same grey dust lay over the vessel, covered the torn and dishevelled clothing of the survivors and lent their faces the ashen pallor of the dead.

Brooking, a little apart from the others, his back against a stanchion, stood staring out over the hopeless waste. Abruptly he twisted round and began to speak. His deep harsh voice was as hard and unemotional as if he had been issuing daily routine orders. The dark, sallow, bitter face was expressionless. "Miss Lessing, gentlemen, officers and men of Q.I. We are, it seems, called upon to face an unprecedented position. I have no doubt in my own mind what has happened. I assume that most, perhaps all, of you are equally aware of the catastrophe that has overtaken us; but in order that we may make a beginning upon a basis of common knowledge, let me recall to your minds the letter which Professor Hayter, the late Professor Hayter, wrote to *The Times* newspaper about ten days ago. In that letter the world was warned of the probable consequences of the mischievous demonstration that the late Professor Ferrars had promised, or threatened,

to give of the tremendous energy released by the annihilation of various atoms. Professor Hayter pointed out that one likely result was the flinging of the earth out of its orbit into outer space or into the sun. We need not now consider that. It has quite obviously not happened or, scanty as my astronomical knowledge is, I am pretty sure we should not be here as survivors. Another likely consequence in Professor Hayter's

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opinion was that the earth would stop dead in its tracks, cease to revolve round its axis and cease also to move in its orbit round the sun. That, I am quite certain, is what has happened. For some seconds, or it may be minutes, after Ferrars touched off his madman's infernal machine, the earth stood still. What again set it in motion I do not know and it will serve no purpose to make wild guesses. We must remain content with the fact, for to that fact we owe our lives. Professor Hayter pointed out what would be entailed by such a stoppage. He said that everything upon the globe's surface, including the water and the air, would be shot off into space at tremendous speed, leaving behind a starkly stripped and barren planet. It would mean, he said, the end of all life upon the earth. Looking round and remembering our experiences of the last twelve hours, can we doubt for one moment that this is what has happened? And if that is so, then, barring a coincidence so extraordinary that we may ignore it, we must face the truth that of all the people of the earth, we are the sole survivors. And that is only a small part of the truth — there is nothing left alive at all upon the earth's surface. There is still, of course, life in the waters that remain, for it is clear that some portions of the oceans and seas are left or we should not be alive. But certainly all living creatures, every structure upon the earth's surface, a considerable part of the water and a portion of the air were hurled off into space during those brief seconds when this planet stood still. How we came to survive is simply explained: the plunge that took us to a depth of nearly two hundred fathoms and which in the normal course of events would have meant inevitable and unescapable death for all was the means of preserving us from the fate that has overtaken the rest of life, for it was the great depth to which we had descended, and that alone, which preserved us. As I see it the re-starting of the earth's motions, whatever may have caused that re-starting, came in the nick of time to prevent us following the rest of things in their headlong rush out into space. That we had already begun that fatal

flight, our experiences give ample evidence and during those brief seconds we were dragged at

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appalling speed for many miles over the bed of the sea. We were sucked into the wake of the departing waters and it was this that shattered Q.I. and caused so many regrettable deaths (how regrettable we may yet have to learn to our cost) among those who were in her when she sank. Our flight was roughly in a direction W.N.W. and our present position is possibly near what was once Palermo. Unfortunately every instrument aboard is hopelessly smashed. But *where* we are is of little importance compared with more urgent problems.

“I said a moment or two ago that, barring a coincidence so extraordinary that it may be ruled out, we are the sole survivors of life upon the planet. That coincidence is of course that at the precise time of the catastrophe another submarine had plunged to her death and had been saved, as we have been, by the depth to which she sank. The arm of coincidence is long, we know, but can we believe for one minute that it is as long as that? I am afraid not. What, then, are the possibilities of other survivors? Occupants, for example of high-flying aeroplanes. The air extends — or did extend — above the earth’s surface to a distance of roughly forty miles. The greatest height we have yet achieved is but little over twelve miles. I am sure that any aeroplanes flying even at that altitude and certainly all travelling below it were the first to suffer death and destruction. What remain? Miners? In theory they should certainly have been unharmed. Without doubt they escaped that precipitate rush into space. But consider for a moment what was happening on the surface above them: every structure was being violently shattered and swept away at a speed of something like five miles a second. Above them not a tree, not a building, not a wall was left standing. What possible hope had they, *have* they, of reaching the surface? They were buried alive without hope of rescue. Hundreds, thousands it may be, are not at this moment yet dead but their death is inevitable before many days have passed.

“It will therefore be best to assume as a general basis for our plans for the future that we alone survive upon a planet that has been stripped bare of all other life and probably of every-

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thing with which to support life. We may have to depend for many months upon the stores of food and water that remain undamaged in Q.I. What these are and whether they are in a sufficient quantity to give us reasonable hope of being able to continue our existence, we shall know when I have been able to make an examination. Food is less likely to be our grave trouble than water. Certainly there *is* water left upon the earth, but just as certainly there is none within the range of our vision. The nearest may be many hundreds of miles away and we have no other means of reaching it for the present except on foot. It will, even when found, undoubtedly be sea water, but that need not worry us unduly; we should be able to distil enough for our needs. We will for the moment shelve such matters and, assuming that we shall be able to maintain ourselves alive, consider what we propose to do. We are now a small and unique community which will have to be self-supporting among great difficulties and hardships and it is plain that only by all pulling together as loyal members of one family shall we win in the struggle before us. For the time being the wreck of Q.I. must be our home, but I am optimistic enough to look forward to the time when we shall leave this broken shell of metal and build our own village.

“Despite all the dangers and hardships before us, it is a great and inspiring thought that in our hands lies the future of the human race.” He seemed, as if quite suddenly, to realise all the implications of that magniloquent sentence and, pausing in some embarrassment, let his glance stray over towards Miss Lessing. She had turned partly away from the group about her and was leaning upon a bent rail staring away over the grey sun-lit scene. She did not appear to be listening and Brooking, with scarcely a pause, went on, “You remember that Professor Hayter pointed out that if the catastrophe which he feared should happen, mankind would have lived in vain and that all the age-long struggles of man and his strivings towards ultimate perfection, all his splendours of endeavour and achievement, became as purposeless and as futile as if life had never risen up from the primeval slime. It is for

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us to see that so dreadful a doom, so black a destiny, shall not mark the grave of mankind.

“I am not, perhaps, in the strictest sense of the word, a religious man, but it seems to me impossible not to discover the hand of God in our miraculous escape from the general death that has overtaken the world. If

that be true, then however hard this fight is going to be, however near we may come to despair and surrender, we may take heart again in full knowledge that God does not set His hand to a task and then abandon it. If He has chosen us to carry on the torch of life upon this planet then we may rest assured that the light of that torch will not be quenched and that always beside us in the struggle fights the unconquerable power of Almighty God.

“We are a little band of men, of men and wo — and women set apart for mighty ends. We must be a band of brothers, not in misfortune but in hope and work. We are, if you like, one large family holding in our hands the future of the race. The earliest social life of communities sprang from the family; it has now returned to it. And as in any family which desires to live in peace and contentment, there must be shouldering of responsibilities, an allocating of tasks, and a ready acceptance of wise direction and control, so too must we proceed as a disciplined body, each man’s will and desire subordinating itself to the common good and obeying the common — and — er — subjecting itself to the common necessity.

“You will think I have talked enough. I agree. Let us now get down to brass tacks and consider our immediate tasks. It is urgently necessary that we have as much information as it is possible to obtain of the conditions around us. As far as we can see from here our surroundings are a wilderness. There is nevertheless the possibility that beyond may be found a state of affairs so unexpected as to render possible a complete change in our plans. Obviously then the first urgent need is exploration, and I hope that three or four exploring parties, with sufficient food and water to last four days, may be able to set off this afternoon. Sir Henry Musgrave, myself, Chief Petty Officer Flagg and two men will remain behind to make an inventory.

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This morning I must find out roughly how much food we have aboard. Chief Petty Officer Flagg and two men will assist me. As soon as we can get to some of the stores and to the water tanks a meal will be prepared and its readiness will be signalled on the bell if that is serviceable or by some other similar means. Meanwhile Mr. Seppings will settle the personnel of the four parties. Or perhaps three would be better — three of five each. But I’ll leave that to you, Seppings.”

It was found that there were nearly 3,000 gallons of water in the half-dozen tanks that had not been damaged, and as far as could be ascertained

by a brief preliminary search in the shattered vessel, there was a large quantity of tinned foods that would be available as soon as men could be got to work clearing away the twisted litter of metal-work. Quite a lot of equipment was intact, including several score of water-bottles. A scratch meal of tinned meat, sardines and tinned fruits, with tea, was ready about noon and for the next few hours everyone turned to to prepare stores for the exploring parties. The three parties set off late in the afternoon with sufficient food and water to last five days. The first party, under Seppings, consisted of Dr. Stiles, Arnold Hoople, Fred Archer and Joseph Dixon; the second, nominally under Lord Sheldringham, included Michael Scott, Samuel Wells, Ted Clark and David Ferguson; and the third was "led" by Delamere, who had with him Evan Jones, John Priestly and Sid.

Walter Fish, one of the big Cornishmen, and Reuben Levinsky, the little Liverpool Hebrew, had been detailed by Flagg to remain behind to assist in the inventory, which, it was reckoned, would occupy the small party the whole of the time the others were away.

At the last minute before they set off, Brooking cast a swift appraising glance over the three parties. His look paused at Delamere and went on to Sidney. "You'll stay behind, Larkins," he said; "you'll probably do more useful work here." He gave a few words of general advice to the leaders and the three parties set off, taking an easterly, westerly and southerly route respectively. They carried torches, hurricane lamps,

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Very-light pistols and axes, but no actual weapons of any sort.

Brooking stood for some minutes watching them moving at no great speed over the uneven rocky surface. He turned to find Miss Lessing beside him.

"Why haven't I been detailed for work?" she asked bluntly.

"Er — I — I beg your pardon, Miss Lessing."

"I asked why I had been left out of a job. Am I not one of the community?"

Uncomfortably aware how much might lurk in that simple question, Brooking was at a momentary loss how to reply and while he hesitated, Miss Lessing went on calmly, "I suppose there's plenty of work a woman can do even on a submarine."

Brooking looked at her. He felt somehow that he was out of his depth and that behind that simple and rather foolish question there was hidden a

great deal that he did not feel himself able or ready to discuss. The matter (and for the moment he sheered away from considering it, from regarding its existence at all) would have to be faced and dealt with, but this was decidedly not the time. Procrastination in this instance, he felt, was not only expedient but was the only possible mode of action.

“Certainly,” he said, “perhaps you will be good enough to undertake the preparation of our meals until——”

“Until what? Until the return of the parties and you have more of the crew at your disposal? What am I to do then? Fool around looking decorative and watching others work? That won’t——”

“I don’t think there’ll be time for anyone to fool around, Miss Lessing,” sharply. “You’ll find your hands as full as anyone’s. But if you wish to take charge of the messing altogether, it has my entire approval.” He saluted her stiffly and, turning away, half-slid, half-scrambled down from his position on the broken conning-tower.

CHAPTER II

EMBARRASSING INTRUSION OF MISS LESSING

THE inventory of the resources of Q.I. was to begin at dawn upon the morrow and late that evening Brooking and Sir Henry Musgrave sat talking on deck, after Flagg and the three men were asleep. The moon, just past its full, was brighter than they had ever known it, every detail of the broken hull stood out almost as clearly as by day and all about them for many miles the tumbled rocks and hummocks stippled the grey waste with blobs of deep black shadow.

Sir Henry leaned back against a stove-in bulkhead, one knee raised and clasped by his red, hairy, spatulate fingers. "I hope to God, Brooking," he said suddenly, "we'll find tobacco that's not been ruined. I can do without the fleshpots at a pinch, but tobacco's a horse of another colour. This new world of ours is going to be a rotten sort of place if one can't smoke."

"We'd lose the taste and the desire for it in a couple of months," replied Brooking with the nearest approach to a smile his harsh features ever knew. "But don't alarm yourself. There should be plenty of tobacco and cigarettes in air-tight tins if we can manage to get at them. Cigars, however, I doubt."

"If there's a decent pipe-tobacco that's good enough. What are you reckoning on finding, Brooking?"

"I hardly know. Probably best not to calculate at all. One thing that might have proved embarrassing we certainly shan't find. Q.I. was not, as you know, a fighting ship."

"You mean weapons, ammunition, high explosive and so forth."

Brooking nodded. "Apart from half a dozen or so Webley-Scott and Smith and Wesson automatics, with a few dozen

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boxes of ammunition, there was not a weapon of any sort on board."

Musgrave did not reply for a moment and then he asked abruptly, "What sort of chaps are the men?"

Brooking's glance held his for a long minute. "About the average, I should say. Most of them pretty good. But I don't know too much about them as a matter of fact. They'd only been aboard about a fortnight. But they've all, with one exception, been at least ten years in the service and

should be dependable enough. The exception happens to be negligible, I fancy. Larkins.”

“The littleish chap, you mean?”

“Littleish? He’s about the average, isn’t he?”

“Well, yes, probably. But he gives the impression of being undersized, insignificant.”

“Yes. He’s not very good material, I should say. Product of two or three generations of industrialism. But he’ll shake down and fit in somewhere. He’ll have to. We’ve no room for passengers. Flagg can be trusted to get out of him anything that’s *in*. ”

“So I should say. Flagg’s the right stuff.”

Brooking nodded. “There may be some that aren’t.”

Musgrave laughed. “We’d be lucky if there weren’t. It still takes all sorts to make a world, however small. But who exactly *are* the doubtful ones?”

“Levinsky for one. He’s a glib rat of a fellow with a perpetual grouch against authority, if I’m any judge on a short acquaintance. He’s also quarrelsome, foul-mouthed, full of smutty talk and, I understand, knows more than a little from actual experience of the shady side of pugilism. But as far as that goes we can offset against him Clark, who fought a lot at Wonderland as a youth, and the Welshman Evan Jones, who’s held the Navy light-weight championship, although Jones is a type I’m not keen about; he’s the laughing, affable sort with a devil’s temper lying in ambush. But most of the men are pretty good average material. Better than we could have hoped in such a toss-up as this. Fish and Priestly, the two Cornishmen,

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are straight dependable chaps and so are Ferguson, the little sandy Glasgow man, Archer, the Suffolk man, and the three Cockneys, Dixon, Wells and Scott. The two last are rather hard cases, perhaps. No, taking things all round, Musgrave, I think in that respect we’re more fortunate than we could have reasonably expected to be. Anyhow, there’s only three things that make trouble with men, drink, idleness and a grievance. The first two will be lacking and we must see the third is also. Which brings me to a matter I wanted to refer to.”

“Alcohol, d’you mean?”

“Yes. I don’t touch it myself, but that’s neither here nor there. It’s a temptation even when one has all the amenities of civilisation to distract,

amuse and interest, but in the wilderness it could easily put finis to the whole thing. There's quite a lot on board. We were well stocked," with a faint smile "for a jolly trip. I should say we left Southampton with five hundred dozen bottles of champagne, twice as many other wines, and several gross of whisky and brandy, to say nothing of jars of ration rum for the men. How much has escaped damage remains to be seen. I had intended to destroy all of it, as the safest plan, but I am prepared to retain two dozen bottles each of champagne, whisky and brandy for medicinal purposes and a dozen jars of rum. As far as my own convictions go, I don't believe the stuff has any medicinal virtues at all, but I'm prepared to bow to other views. Compromise has got to be a main brick in our foundation. The difficulty is going to be to find a safe place to keep it."

"And to keep its existence a secret," suggested Musgrave. "That's the most important side of it, Brooking. If there's one real boozier among the men the stuff's going to be a menace sooner or later. I'm half inclined to think destroying the lot would be the best thing to do. It would be one fewer anxiety. Only I don't happen to share your doubts as to its value at a pinch. I've seen several lives snatched out of the grave by a timely dose of spirits."

"We'll retain some, anyhow, for the time being. We can always destroy it if it looks like becoming a danger."

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"You said something about automatics. Six, wasn't it? What are you going to do——"

"I propose to keep these and a box of ammunition — one thousand rounds. We shall have to find a safe hiding-place for them. And the fewer who know of their existence the better. You, Seppings and myself, say. What do you think?"

"Leave me out. You and Seppings being armed need upset no one. But I'm a different matter altogether. You see that?"

"Yes. All right."

"Doesn't the men's equipment include——"

"Yes. In the ordinary way we'd have short rifles, cutlasses and service revolvers on board, but we weren't yet commissioned, you know. We were, for the trip, more of a small luxury liner than anything else. A stroke of luck whichever way you look at it. It means there should be a superabundance of

food and other useful stores and a minimum of stuff that might lead to trouble.”

“You really think we *are* alone in the world, Brooking?”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

Musgrave put up one stubby hand and caressed his bald shining pate. In the brilliant moonlight his big florid face was patterned with queer sharply defined high lights and dark shadows that grotesquely caricatured his normal expression and made it difficult to judge his thoughts and emotions. “I don’t know. It seems an amazing business. But, then, I can’t put forward any other explanation that fits the facts. Mixed bag, apart from the crew, aren’t we?” he added irrelevantly.

“Yes.” After a long pause Brooking added in rather too indifferent a tone, “Know anything of Delamere?”

“I’ve seen him in about half a dozen of his plays, but I’d never met him before.”

“I seem to have heard——”

“Oh!” with a faint shrug of his big heavy shoulders, “there’s talk of course, but of whom isn’t there? Club-bar and mess talk. About ten per cent, of it truth.”

“Ten per cent.’s often a lot,” commented Brooking grimly. “Met Hoople before?”

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“Only as a fellow guest at dinners and affairs of that sort. I don’t care for his books much but I admire his brains. But sex stuff in books never did appeal to me. All a matter of taste. I like a bawdy tale, but not in print. Unreasonable that, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Early environment’s got a good deal to do with it. I was reared in a household where no one ever heard swearing. It was a strict chapel atmosphere and bawdiness was unthinkable. It was more than that even; to mention a woman’s body would have been considered indecent. And so I grew up with a sort of shrinking horror of anything approaching the lewd or smutty and I’ve never outgrown it. But I don’t suggest there’s no room for bawdy humour in the world — the old world, anyhow. But, like most other things, it needs to be in the right place, and I agree with you that a book isn’t that. A mess or a bar is all right. We know who hears it then. But as for Hoople’s books, I’ve read none. I know his reputation stands pretty high and that’s all I *do* know.”

“H’m. Well, I should say that he’s undoubtedly got the keenest and well — er — slickest brain of any of us. Unless,” with a wide smile that made his big strong teeth flash in the moonlight, “our bishop’s hiding his light under a bushel.”

“Or Lord Sheldringham?”

“Sheldringham! Good Lord! He’s one of the most charming, courteous, mediæval sort of persons you’re likely to meet in a lifetime, but no one’s ever accused him of possessing brains. He’s the aristocrat of the best type to his fingertips; *too* fine, if you like, kind of inbred to fragility sort of thing. Mentally and physically. Quite incapable of doing any but the decent thing. And dying for it, too. But beyond that . . .”

“Yes, a mixed bag as you say. But might be worse.”

There was a silence that lasted several minutes. Each man was waiting for the other to broach a matter that had never been far from the surface of their thoughts during the whole of the conversation. Suddenly Musgrave said abruptly, “To return to the liquor question, Brooking.”

Brooking, obviously surprised and a trifle disconcerted, said, “Yes? What about it?”

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“We’re going to be up against bigger temptations than liquor.”

It seemed obvious enough what was in Musgrave’s mind, but the blunt, almost coarse way it was couched made Brooking hesitate for a moment lest he were jumping to a wrong conclusion.

His hesitancy provoked Musgrave into abrupt explanation. “I mean Miss Lessing,” clasp and unclasp his ugly fingers round his knee. “We’ve got to face these things, Brooking. We’ve *all* got to face them, Miss Lessing no less than the rest of us.”

“H’m. Yes. She’s certainly going to complicate matters.”

“Complicate’s putting it mildly. And the devil of it is that without her we’re nothing — less than nothing. Your whole scheme, plan, dream, *our* whole dream, if you like, of a new world, of carrying on the torch, as you put it, stands or falls by her.”

“Yes. I’ve thought a good deal about it although I’ve said nothing. It’s a bit premature anyway, isn’t it? The whole business in her regard will require pretty delicate handling. There’s no blinking the fact that she’s the only woman in a world of nineteen men, most of them in the prime of physical life. Nothing’s going to be gained by avoiding that blunt plain

issue, but on the other hand nothing's to be gained by rushing it. Isn't there a pretty large possibility that the thing'll settle itself before long?"

"You mean she'll fall in love with someone?"

"Well, yes, if you like to put it that way. That she'll agree to marry one of us, anyhow. I take it we're all eligible."

"Us? You mean all of us?"

"Of course. Except Sheldringham. He's her uncle, isn't he? Rules him out. That leaves six. Pretty good choice, don't you think?"

"Yes," laughing, "I thought for the minute you meant the whole bunch. Pretty tough on the men, somehow."

"I daresay." Harshly, "They're still under discipline and if we're not going to have trouble they'll have to stay there."

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I think I've already made it plain that that's assumed from the beginning."

"Well, you're the skipper, Brooking. But just for the sake of argument _____"

"If we begin arguing about it we're lost. It won't bear argument. It's neither just nor reasonable. It's simply discipline and I shall maintain discipline at all costs."

"You'll fight for it?"

"There'll be no fighting. I shall certainly shoot if the necessity arises. That's why I won't argue the point, even with you, Musgrave."

"I think that's a pity. I'd quite a lot of pretty little suppositions I wanted to put to you and I'd have liked to hear how you proposed to cope with them."

"I probably shouldn't have the remotest notion. I've found it best in the service to wait until the thing happens and then decide on the spur of the moment. I'm inclined to think when one's keyed up by a tight corner one's wits work at their best and the resultant decision is likely to be far wiser than anyone might come to by calm deliberation long beforehand."

"That's hardly in accordance with accepted opinion."

"Perhaps not. But it's my line. And in any case I've never known things happen as they've been expected to. A cut and dried plan beforehand often ignores some salient unexpected feature that alters the whole aspect of things. And in the present case I'm sure I'm right. We've enough on our hands here and now without looking ahead. We've to assure ourselves of the means of survival. Until that's settled I don't fancy other matters will

arise. There's nothing like work for keeping the mind from worrying about possibilities and eventualities and such like. And I propose to work everyone to the limit of their strength, myself included. We begin the inventory, for example, at dawn."

"Good for you! In that case, then, bed is clearly designated. There's no chance of a night-cap, I suppose?" with a dry grin.

"Afraid not. Unless you care to do a bit of personal exploration."

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"No. Set a bad example if I were seen or heard."

"Care for tea? I'm brewing myself a pot before I turn in."

"Thanks all the same, Brooking, but I don't know what my stomach would say if I dropped tea into it at this hour. It's been trained to expect more exciting fare and I don't want it to turn up rough. By the bye, there's medicines and so on on board?"

"There were. Sick bay and dispensary were models. It's a minor disaster Calthrop didn't survive. He was a fine surgeon and, well," with a shrug, "there's nothing so priceless as a missing doctor when he's needed in a hurry. If the dispensary's intact I'll not feel any too easy about handling the stuff."

"Probably Hoople——"

"But I shall do so all the same. Skipper's job," grimly. "But I hope it won't come to operations."

Musgrave had risen from his seat and was gingerly letting himself down below. He looked up at Brooking and by a trick of the moonlight his face seemed distorted into an unpleasant grin. "Bound to come to something like that sooner or later, isn't it?"

"How's that?"

"We're damned and done for if it doesn't. Another eventuality, Brooking, best left till it crops up, eh? Well, good-night. Give me a shout if I'm asleep at dawn."

The three exploring parties returned four days later. Their reports, which were very similar, strongly supported the view, now held by all, that the destruction of life on the earth had been complete. They had found no water except runnels here and there in scours and crevices, although Delamere reported that just before they turned back, after travelling about forty-five miles due west, they had caught the glitter of sun on what appeared to be a

stretch of water some twenty miles or so ahead. They had been, he said, steadily ascending a long, rather steep slope for the previous six hours, and it was from

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the summit of this slope that the glimpse of the water, if it were water, had been obtained. Apart from this his report differed in no way from the others: a vast grey wilderness, scarred, torn and scoured, and littered with tumbled rocks. All were agreed upon one point, a point that had already been noted by those remaining on Q.I.: that visibility was astonishingly clear, all smoke and volcanic dust having been swept from the sky; and further, that the noon sun was not only hotter than before the disaster but appeared considerably larger.

Brooking arranged for a general meeting for the next morning at which a full account of their salvage work on Q.I. would be given and plans discussed for the future. The chief engineer's cabin had been found to be practically undamaged, with the key still in the lock of the door, and to this room Brooking that evening summoned Dr. Stiles and Lord Sheldrington to discuss matters in secret with himself and Musgrave.

"I don't propose," began Brooking, as soon as they were seated, "to go into the matter of our material resources. That will be dealt with to-morrow. But you may accept my assurance that we need have no immediate worries in that respect and indeed," with a faint grim smile and a gesture towards a small table, where a bottle of whisky, some mugs and several boxes of cigarettes had been placed, "even the amenities of civilisation will not be entirely lacking for a while. But there are urgently important matters which, Musgrave and I feel, need to be thrashed out among ourselves. Some of these have doubtless occurred to you."

"I think I understand what's in your mind, Brooking," interrupted Sheldrington, "and I've no doubt Dr. Stiles does. Don't you think it would be advisable to have Lieutenant Seppings, Mr. Delamere and Mr. Hoople with us before going any further. What do you think, Sir Henry?"

Before Musgrave could reply the Bishop of Oldcaster cleared his throat noisily. He seemed about to stand up but changed his mind suddenly. He passed a hand over his red

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fleshy face and again cleared his throat. "I'm inclined to agree with Lord Sheldringham," he said in his booming voice, "if Sir Henry will pardon my interruption."

Musgrave smiled. "I think that's a sound proposal." He paused for a moment and then added, "By the bye, it's high time we dropped titles, anyhow amongst ourselves. We're bound to sooner or later. Why not now? Any objections?" looking round with a faint grin. "Good. Pass over that bottle then, Sheldringham, and we'll drink to a more free and easy atmosphere. And the sooner, my Lord Bishop, you get into some less intimidating duds the sooner I'll feel less like a cheeky schoolboy in addressing you as Stiles."

The Bishop laughed with that faint sense of constraint which he always felt when meeting men socially. Behind that big dominating physique and booming voice there lurked an ever-present fretting sense of inferior virility — and Musgrave's remark touched a raw spot. It was *he* who invariably felt like a boy among men. "All right, Musgrave," he said loudly, on a jaunty note of joviality which he felt was only too plainly factitious. "You're absolutely right over this title business and if there are other clothes on board I'll be only too happy to get into them."

"There are a number of officers' uniforms," interrupted Brooking. "It would be as well if we all dressed alike. I'll put it to Hoople and Delamere when they come in. I agree it would be better if we had them in and Seppings. Perhaps Musgrave will bring them along."

Some five minutes or so later the door, which was slightly jammed, was pushed slowly open and Musgrave returned, followed by Seppings, Hoople and Delamere.

Seppings saluted Brooking and sat down. Hoople nodded and, shuffling over to a corner propped himself up against the door of an upper locker. Delamere dropped on to a box and as he did so he noticed the whisky and cigarettes. "Good God!" he drawled, "life becomes once more possible. Are you bartender, Sir Henry?"

"I don't mind adding that to my other duties," smiled Musgrave,

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pushing over the cigarettes. "You having a drink, Hoople?"

"No, thanks. A cigarette will do for me. It's worth while being a survivor if life's going to offer us tobacco."

“Well, gentlemen,” began Brooking, with a trace of impatience, “there are a few matters we wish to discuss before to-morrow’s general meeting. Musgrave and myself think it would be well for us to reach some common standpoint before we meet the men. We are in the first place dropping titles amongst ourselves.”

“But not before the men?” asked Seppings.

“No. Better be kept up when the men are about.”

“I’m not so sure it wouldn’t be wiser to drop them altogether,” said Hoople, “and let the men do so, too.” He raised his reedy voice slightly at the expression of disagreement on the faces of the others. Upon the faces of both Brooking and Stiles there was more than mere disagreement. “It’s a question to my mind,” went on Hoople, “not of to-day or to-morrow or next week but of a year, five years ahead. Can you guarantee to maintain discipline and the deferential attitude and address of the men for that length of time or longer still? If you can’t, and frankly I’m quite certain you can’t, then sooner or later the men will themselves drop the attitude and mode of address. *That* will be decidedly dangerous. Having discarded so much, having, that is, reached a point where they can *decide* to discard so much, they will obviously be quite capable and ready to go much further, to lengths without limit. In that case the wisest plan would be to abolish straight away, that is at to-morrow’s meeting, all ranks and titles and to get together as one group of equals and make our plans for the future from that basis. There’s nothing to be gained by blinking the fact that our position as leaders is a purely artificial one. We owe it to accidents of birth, education and so forth and to our quite fortuitous positions at the time of the catastrophe. Those ranks and rights and privileges rested upon conditions of life which have now broken down and disappeared. Among the men there may be half a dozen who,

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under these new conditions, may be far more suitable to exercise control than any of us. If that is so they will certainly achieve that position of control sooner or later. We are back again to a large extent to the beginnings of human existence. To attempt to superimpose upon these quasi-primitive conditions the ranks and arbitrary rights and privileges of a complex civilisation is to my mind inviting certain disaster. Completely distasteful as it may be to us, and to some especially because of their recent official positions, my view is that our surest hope of security and happiness is to

sweep away all distinctions, drop all rights and privileges and start afresh upon the basis of equality. It will be, it seems to me, merely doing at once what time will eventually do, however much we fight to prevent it. And in all probability this abrogation of rank and so forth will be but a temporary matter. For a leader — leaders we must have, and within a year it will be found who are the most worthy of the posts — I see no reason why the end of the year should not find us under our present leadership. Don't misunderstand me," he ended, as he saw Brooking was about to speak, unable apparently to remain silent any longer. "A belief in the pathetic fallacy of the equality of man is not one of my failings. If I believed it possible for us to maintain the status quo, or even our present position of authority, I should be only too glad to agree to the attempt being made, but I am convinced of its impossibility, and the only other course seems to me to accept the inevitable with a good grace. If we wait till our authority is taken from us we shall be stripped of far more."

"Is there anyone else who agrees with Hoople?" asked Brooking.

"I'm afraid I do in a way — sir — er — Brooking," said Seppings surprisingly, "but I'm prepared to abide by the view of the majority."

"Anyone else?" asked Brooking, and as there was no response, he went on, "Well, Hoople, let me say straight away that in my considered opinion to put your suggestion into

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practice would mean immediate disaster, a chaotic state of things in which every man would be fighting for his own hand. I therefore propose to attempt what you conceive as the impossible and to put this small community of ours upon a sound base of authority and discipline. And since, in the last resort, all authority and discipline rests upon force, I am retaining for the use of Seppings and myself the only offensive weapons we have: six automatics with ample ammunition. And I certainly should not hesitate to use force should there be any attempt to deny that authority — to break that discipline.

"Since you are overruled upon this matter I take it that you will abide by the opinion of the majority?" As Hoople shrugged his shoulders, but nodded, he continued: "There is really little else that can be usefully discussed at this juncture. I have taken possession of a certain quantity of wine and spirits for strictly medicinal purposes and this, with the weapons, will remain under lock and key in this cabin. The key will remain in my

possession. Tobacco and cigarettes, of which we have a large quantity, will also be locked up here but will be shared as a regular weekly ration and in this matter as in that of food, quarters and work there will be strict equality of treatment for everyone, *everyone*."

"Including Miss Lessing," laughed Delamere.

"Including Miss Lessing." Brooking paused a moment. He felt that every man present had the same thought in his mind and coming to a swift determination he continued: "This matter of Miss Lessing will have to be faced. The position is one of extraordinary difficulty, delicacy, not only for us but for her."

"Seems to me, Brooking," put in Delamere, smiling blandly, "that Miss Lessing is leading man and leading lady rolled into one and our parts are little more than those of supers. It's going to be she who'll have the ultimate say in things — a sort of She-Who-Must Be-Obedied of Rider Haggard. This community of ours looks like being a kind of Matriarchy."

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"We'll hope not, Delamere," observed Stiles blandly. "Polyandry was one of the basic principles of most of the matriarchates, you may remember."

"I'm afraid," interposed Brooking, his voice harsh and strident, "that we've no time to discuss academic questions. We've a stiff problem to face and that problem is Miss Lessing. The point is——"

"The point is, gentlemen, why am I being discussed behind my back?"

Miss Lessing stood framed in the doorway. Musgrave, on returning with Seppings and the other two men, had omitted to lock the door and Miss Lessing, hearing the sound of voices, had pushed open the door without being noticed and fired her verbal shot with startling effect.

Brooking was the first to recover himself. "Please sit down, Miss Lessing," he said quietly. "I am sorry," he went on, as soon as she had seated herself between Sheldringham and Seppings, "that you should think we were talking about you behind your back."

"Well, you were, weren't you?"

"In actual fact, yes, but not in the way that is usually implied by such a remark. We have been discussing our general situation and naturally your name came into the conversation. But beyond——"

"I'd better say at once," interrupted Miss Lessing calmly, "that I've been standing outside the door for some time. It may save you a lot of misplaced

diplomacy if I add that I've probably heard all you've been talking about, in so far as it concerns myself. Possibly a little more."

There was an uncomfortable silence for nearly a minute and then Sheldringham said in a tone of mildly avuncular reproof, "I don't think you ought to have done that, Sylvia. It's hardly fair on us."

"Nonsense, Uncle. But if you're going to talk that sort of silliness was it fair on me to leave me out of this precious little gathering? To put it mildly, I've as much right as anyone else to know what's afoot."

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"Er — Miss Lessing," interrupted Stiles, "it was really out of consideration for yourself. You must realise——"

"Oh, good Lord!" throwing up her hands, "if we're going to begin this marvellous new world on a foundation of damned humbug we'd far better have died with the rest of mankind. Now, look here, as I said, I've heard quite a lot of your talk and before I hear any more I'd like to do a little talking on my own account. In the first place I understand you're dropping titles and so forth. Well, that's certainly a sound proposal. So we'll drop Miss Lessing. It can either be Sylvia or Lessing. If I've any preference at all it's for the latter. I was always Lessing at school to my friends. Tradition of the place, I believe, and unusually sensible for a tradition. But I don't mind." With a smile, "I'll answer to both."

"Now you may assume I know everything that's been under discussion. I do. Most of it. And frankly I think it's been a pretty poor display. The one really constructive suggestion was Hoople's. I believe, with him, that we ought to begin by a general discarding and start on the basis of equality."

"That has already been negatived, Miss — er — Less — Sylvia," interrupted Brooking, "but it can be put to the meeting again if you wish."

"I certainly do," her eyes upon Seppings.

"Very well. Those in favour of Hoople's proposal? One, two, three. Thank you. Against. One, two, three, four. Thank you. Hoople's proposal is lost. I think it only straight to add that if it had been won I should not have carried it into effect. As Commanding Officer of Q.I. I claim the right of veto while I hold that position. Go on, Sylvia, please."

"If you're going to take up such a perfectly insane and despotic position as that," went on Sylvia, "I fail to see—" She broke off and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, we'll agree to leave that point for the present. I don't think it's of much importance. Time will possibly effect a change. But I do

want to straighten a few things out before decisions of any sort are made. In the first place ignore the fact that I'm a woman and keep in mind what is far more important, that I'm physically

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capable of as much hard work as any one of you — including the crew — and more than some. I'll remind the company that I've ridden to hounds for years, that I've flown solo from Croydon to Rome and back in twenty-four hours and that I've driven a car in the Grand Prix — no small test of endurance. I'm therefore quite capable of shouldering my small share of whatever is going. For the time being I'll look after meals and so forth but I reserve the right to drop that sort of work if other work comes along for which I consider I'm more suited.

"Now for the subject that you all seem to find so disturbing: my sex. I've said that in the matter of work that is to be ignored. I think also for the time being it had best be ignored altogether."

"My dear Sylvia," put in Sheldringham, "you're talking bosh. It's all very well to be blunt and frank and all that sort of thing, but the fact remains——"

"Facts always do remain, Uncle. There's no need to beat about the bush. I'm one woman among nineteen men and you think I'm going to be a cause of trouble. That I'm a grave temptation like the whisky and brandy that Brooking is going to keep under lock and key. Were you thinking of keeping me under lock and key as well? Well, what do you propose to do about it? You needn't bother to reply. I'll help you out. Let me say straight away that I don't yet accept Brooking's view that we are the sole survivors. When I do it will be time to re-open the discussion about my provocative sex. I prefer to think that in all probability there are hundreds, thousands, of other survivors and that within the next few months, within a year at the outside, we shall have communicated with them, joined up with them. And among them will undoubtedly be scores, hundreds of women and your problem will solve itself. I intend therefore to look upon ourselves merely as a party shipwrecked upon some small island and waiting for rescue — a rescue which, in the normal course of events, should not be delayed beyond a year at the very outside. When I finally abandon that view it will, as I've said,

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be time to look things squarely in the face. But it is little use my holding that view if no one else does. That would simply mean that all the rest of you, including the men, would be facing a problem (and probably making a hash of it) which I refuse to face. And so it will be your duty to-morrow, Brooking, to make it perfectly clear to everyone that you have been premature in your assumptions and that it is quite on the cards that there is a considerable number of other survivors, men and women, whom we are bound to meet before long. I'm quite aware it makes things rather awkward, but it can't be helped. And you've only yourselves to blame, all of you. You should have taken me into your confidence from the beginning. I think that's all I've to say at the moment."

"And quite enough too, Sylvia," grumbled Sheldringham. "You must know you're talking sheer nonsense. It's impossible for any reasonable being to doubt the fact that we're the sole survivors; and to ask Brooking to put forward your cock-and-bull theory is, to say the least of it, well, extraordinarily trying."

"I think it's the obvious way out of a difficulty," said Hoople. "Procrastination, far from being a vice, is one of the most useful of all human attributes, and this is decidedly a case for putting off decisions as long as possible. Leaving aside your own personal feelings natural to any man who's got to make a public withdrawal, don't you agree, Brooking?"

"I'll put the proposal to the meeting," replied Brooking. "In favour? One, two, three, four, five. Very well," with a touch of irritability, "I will carry out your wishes to-morrow, but I should like to point out that it will make all our proposed plans of work difficult to carry through. If the men are going to believe that it's merely a question of months before we're 'rescued,' as it were, they're hardly likely to put that energy and real grit into the work that is going to be needed if we are to succeed."

"I shouldn't worry about that, Brooking," said Hoople quietly. "The men won't believe anything of the sort. But

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they'll be quite agreeable to pretend they do for a few months anyhow. And that will give us a breathing space of," smilingly, "precisely a few months."

And upon that note of compromise the meeting broke up.

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CHAPTER III

FACETIOUSNESS OF REUBEN LEVINSKY

THE general meeting was held immediately after breakfast. The party sat on the rocky sea-bed in the long cool shadow of Q.I.'s hull. Brooking was seated on a hummock facing the others, most of whom were smoking. There was a general air of cheerfulness, due as much perhaps to the bright beauty of the morning as to the tobacco and a surprisingly good breakfast. Brooking had a note-book in his hand and Flagg stood at attention beside him. Seppings, Sheldringham and Sylvia, a little apart from the others, were laughing and chatting. The men were barefooted and were wearing only trousers and cotton vests; Sylvia, in a blue silk summer frock, might have been on the plage of any fashionable continental resort; the others all wore naval officers' uniforms which, in the case of Stiles and Hoople, lacked their customary dignity, owing to poor fitting. Hoople, in particular, was grotesquely served by his uniform which had been made for a man several inches taller. It was not until several days later that one of the men removed his sartorial handicap and enabled him to escape, in his own words, from the sodality of Grock and Chaplin.

"The result of our investigations," began Brooking, without any preliminary, "removes at least our major anxieties. We have sufficient water, if used with ordinary care, to last six months; and ample food, including tea, coffee and cocoa, for two or three years. For the present, water will be allowed on a scale of two gallons per person per day. This may be augmented or decreased later. The probability is that it will be augmented, as I see no reason why we may not look forward

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to rainfall within the next few months, possibly weeks. The food is all tinned and includes meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables. There are also quantities of hermetically sealed tin boxes of dried fruits, nut kernels and peas. And very fortunately we have found several ten-gallon drums of lime-juice. There is sufficient tobacco and cigarettes to last many years if strict rationing is adhered to. The ration I propose at present is a weekly one of two ounces of pipe-tobacco or seventy cigarettes, or one ounce of tobacco with thirty-five cigarettes. In the matter of alcohol I have destroyed all our

stock with the exception of a number of bottles of champagne, whisky and brandy and thirty-one gallon jars of rum. These will be kept under lock for medicinal purposes. Of uniforms, underclothing, etc., there is a bare sufficiency. We found it necessary to strip all the bodies of the dead. One of the most difficult of our jobs has been the disposal of those bodies. There were thirty-seven and the last five were burnt only a few hours before the return of the first exploring party. Fortunately, we have ample stores of petrol.

“I think it will be agreed that in the matter of victualling our supplies go far beyond reasonable expectation. In other respects, I am afraid we are less fortunate. Engines, launches, lighting apparatus and so forth are irretrievably smashed. One small fifteen-foot motor-boat we may be able to repair and it is just possible that out of the wreck of the engines we may be able to knock together a small caterpillar car. A few tool-lockers were found intact under the debris of the engine-room and we shall therefore not be entirely without tools. Practically all other stores have been smashed or destroyed or have disappeared. It is just possible that further exploration may find some of these, which may have dropped through the holes rent in the hull of Q.I. during her headlong career over the ocean bed. There is one grave lack: drugs and other medical stores. We shall have to trust to Nature to keep us in good health.

“There are about three hundred torches in good condition and several sealed cases of batteries, but I have hopes that we

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may be able to rig up a lighting plant later on. There is enough metal, wood and other fabric in the wrecked rooms and cabins to enable us to undertake hut-building on a quite comfortable scale. And that brings me to plans for our future. But before dealing with those I must point out that it would be foolish to rule out entirely the possibility, probability even, of other survivors. It may well be that owing to circumstances which have not entered into our calculations there may be hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of other men and women alive on the earth. And if that is so, sooner or later we shall be able to open up communication with them. Flagg tells me that he is quite hopeful of having one of the wireless transmitters working within a month or so. Once communication is opened up a meeting would not be long delayed. I don't wish to raise hopes that are never likely to be fulfilled, but I think it would be well for all of us to keep

in mind, at least for some months, the possibility that we are not alone in the world. It will be time enough a year hence to abandon that hope.

“And now let me roughly outline my proposals for making the best of our position. And in this matter, but in this matter alone, I am going to make a complete right-about-face and ask you to assume that we *are* the sole survivors of the human race and that the sooner we make of our little community something of a well organised and efficiently functioning small state, or nation or what you will, the happier and more comfortable it will be for all of us.

“Q.I. for several reasons, some of which are fast becoming unpleasantly obvious, is unsuitable as a habitation, nor with the means at our disposal can it be rendered fit. We may have to remain here for many months, possibly years, and I therefore propose first of all to build a permanent camp or settlement, using the material from Q.I. for building purposes. This will by itself be no light task, as our foundations are rock. The building of this camp is the first urgent necessity, and until it is completed it would be premature to make further definite plans. But what I have in mind is that we shall

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use the camp, once it is established, as a headquarters from which exploring parties will regularly set out as fully equipped and victualled as possible with the aim of reaching the sea, or, and this is a faint chance, discovering arable land of any sort. And always of course they will make every effort to get into touch with any other survivors and keep a sharp look-out for any vestiges of destroyed towns, or wreckage of any kind. Not that I think they will be likely to find such remains. It is more than probable that the sea will in course of time begin to come back and that we shall be able to extend our exploring by means of the small motor-boat. But that is too distant an eventuality to concern us now. We are, in any case, at a fair elevation and the sea, should it come back, is unlikely to be a danger.

“And now about duties. Miss Lessing, for the time being, will attend to the domestic details such as cooking and so forth and Larkins will assist her, while each day two other men will be detailed for camp duties. The rest will be divided into two working-parties, one under Lieutenant Seppings and the other under Chief Petty Officer Flagg. Both these parties will be under my general supervision. I have already mentioned that we have no drugs or medicines and that we must depend upon Nature to keep us well.

That means, in other words, that we must depend upon ourselves. There will therefore be regular physical training each morning and arrangements will be made for games. Jones, who still holds the light-weight championship of the Navy, I believe? Yes, I thought so. Jones, then, will be physical drill instructor. Our bell is missing, but Flagg has fixed up a siren which will take its place.

“Reveille will for the present be at five. Physical drill from five-fifteen until six. Breakfast at six-thirty. At seven-thirty the whole camp will parade shaved and in fatigue dress for a short service. The morning’s work will begin at eight; there will be a break of fifteen minutes at ten-thirty for tea and a smoke and work will then be resumed till noon. Dinner will be served at twelve-thirty and while the hot weather lasts

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work will not begin again until two-thirty and will end for the day at five, except for camp fatigues. Tea will be at five-thirty; prayers at nine; supper at nine-fifteen and lights out at ten-fifteen. Wednesday afternoon will be a holiday and Saturday afternoon will be given up to games. There will be morning and evening church parades on Sunday and no work, other than camp fatigues, will be done upon that day. I think this is all for the present. I am willing to consider any suggestions any of you may care to make or to answer any questions.”

It was plain that Brooking’s proposals had been listened to with mixed feelings. The men were obviously somewhat critical but were waiting for some of the others to speak first. They avoided Brooking’s glance, looking from Hoople to Delamere as if they expected them to open a discussion. Hoople, however, seemed completely occupied with the discomforts of his uniform, while Delamere was lying back with his eyes closed and a faint smile upon his lips.

At last Jones stood up and saluted.

“Well, Jones?”

“We’re still in the service, sir?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do we draw pay, sir?”

“Pay? What would you spend it on?”

“I don’t mean it like that, sir. But if we’re only sort of marooned here and likely to be rescued, the world not being destroyed after all, and we still being in the service, why-”

“Certainly, Jones. You will all be credited with your pay and should we be rescued and find, as you say, that civilisation has not been destroyed, then you will receive back pay and all allowances as you would in normal times.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Jones was about to sit down but whispering voices prompted him from behind and he went on, “Working parties will include everybody, sir?”

“Certainly. We shall share and share alike in work, play and everything else.”

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“Camp fatigues?” put in a voice and there were titters from one or two of the men and several loud whispers of, “Shut up, Levinsky!”

Brooking looked over to where the thin, sallow little Liverpool Jew was lounging against a rock. “Do you want to know anything, Levinsky?” he asked sharply.

“Only asking about camp fatigues, sir,” jerking himself upright and saluting slowly.

“Well, what about them?”

“Just asked, sir, if camp fatigues would be shared?”

“Everything will be shared. We can only make a success of our life together on the strict principle of share and share alike. If we *are* the sole survivors then this camp of ours will build the foundations of a new world.” Not too felicitously, “It is a sort of new Garden of Eden.”

“Nineteen Adams and one Eve,” muttered Levinsky, with a grin that was faintly insolent. There was a smothered laugh. Brooking, who had not caught Levinsky’s remark, said angrily, “What is it? Speak up.”

“Nothing, sir,” sitting down hastily.

There was a moment’s strained silence. Flagg left Brooking’s side and walking over to Levinsky stooped and said something to him. The Jew scowled but made no reply and Flagg returned to his place.

Brooking’s face darkened. He seemed about to repeat his question to Levinsky and then apparently changed his mind. He looked at his watch. “It is now eight-thirty. The camp will parade at nine, when the two working-parties and the camp-fatigue men will be detailed. For the present the two camp-fatigue men each day will give assistance to Miss Lessing. Work to-day will commence at nine-thirty. Parade-call will be one sustained note of ten seconds on the siren. Meal-calls, three short notes. Cease work, one

sustained or long note followed by one short note. Lights out, one long note followed by two short notes. Emergency call will be a sustained note of half-a-minute repeated every minute.”

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Some hours later, Sid was standing about awkwardly and uneasily in the temporary cook-house rigged up in the bows of Q.I. Sylvia was taking tins down from one of the shelves and piling them up on the table.

“Do you know what’s in these, Larkins?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Well, what?” half smiling.

“Meat and vegetables, miss.”

“Oh? Do you open them before cooking them?”

“No, miss. Oh, yes, miss, you can if you like.”

“Don’t say ‘no, miss, yes, miss.’ If you must say something of the sort say Miss Lessing or madam or — oh — anything you like except ‘no, miss, and yes, miss.’”

“Yes, miss,” flushing and shifting about on his feet.

“What do you mean you can open them if you like? What’s usually done?”

“We ’eat them first, miss, and——”

“But how can you eat them, Larkins, if—oh, I beg your pardon. Yes? Go on.”

He flushed more redly. “We *heat* them,” aspirating violently and hating himself for his lapse. He knew all about aitches. Had been caned often enough for it at Peckover. He *could* sound them. Always did. And then he must go and talk like that. Like a silly fool. But he always did things like a silly fool. “*Heat* them in *hot* water,” he went on lamely, “and open them a’terwards.”

“Is that what you always do?”

“No, miss. Not always, miss.” He’d *have* to say miss. Couldn’t help it. Anyhow, it wasn’t wrong. That’s what they always said at Peckover. And he couldn’t say madam. Too dam’ silly that was. Nor Miss Lessing. He might try but he knew he’d forget. He licked his lips and went on hurriedly,

“Sometimes all the tins are opened first, miss, and put into the dixie and hotted up all together.”

“Well, which is best? Which do you like best?”

“I don’t — er — don’t mind, miss.”

“Oh? Well, I think we’ll have them opened. We’ll be able

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to see what’s in them and that’s something. Good at opening tins? Hardly the sort of weather for stew, is it?” looking up through the buckled plates at the blazing sky.

“No, miss. Er — yes, miss, I can open tins,” looking round in hasty confusion for a tin-opener.

“That’s splendid. Be careful!” as Sid began a frenzied attack upon one of the tins. “That’s the way to cut yourself badly and you know Broo —er — Commander Brooking says we’ve no medical supplies of any sort. And now you’ve done it!”

“It’s nothing, miss,” applying his torn finger to his mouth.

“Show me.”

“It’s nothing, miss,” beginning awkwardly and with increasing embarrassment upon another tin. The blood began to well out of the cut and drip on to the tin.

“Wait a minute, Larkins,” impatiently, “you can’t open tins and drip blood into them. Let me tie it up and don’t rush at them like a bull in a china shop. There you are. And don’t get dirt in it. There seems a terrible lot of grease.”

“Yes, miss. We take most of it out or skim it off of the top when it’s hotted. Repeats something chronic if you don’t. Shall I take it out first?”

“You’d better, I think, Larkins. We’re going to loathe the sight of tins before long, I fancy. We’ll have to have tinned fruit to-day, I’m afraid. We must get dried peas and fruits soaked after this. Soak them over night. You’d better put some in soak each evening. You’ve not been in the service long, have you?” surveying his pinched, sun-blistered, insignificant features with faintly amused indifference.

“Nearly six year, miss.”

“I shouldn’t have thought it. Oh, you went in as a boy, was that it?”

“Went straight from Peckover, miss, to *The Admiral Collingwood* when I was just turned fourteen.”

“A training ship?”

“Yes, miss.”

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“Is Peckover where you were born?”

“No, miss. It’s an orphanage. I was born at Medbury.”

“Oh? An orphanage? Go on, Larkins. How long were you with *The Collingwood*? How many tins have you done? Ten? How many do you think we shall want?”

“We put in one a man. But it’s too much for some. *Half-a-tin* —” managed it then all Sir Garnet — “is as much as I could stomach. But I don’t eat much. Never did. Why, at Peckover, where we was half-starved, if you’d listen to what some of ’em said, often I couldn’t clean my plate up. Used to make me reach when I had to. Used to pay us if we didn’t. But —”

“Well, we’ll do fifteen, Larkins. That gives us three-quarters of a tin each. I’m inclined to agree with you. I’m sure half would be all I could stomach. That’ll do, then. You might get water in these dixies. You add water, of course? How much? All right. Well, get that much in each. You can open the fruit later on. Do you remember where the coffee was put? Never mind now. Look for it when you come back. I want water at once.”

Sid went stumbling clumsily along the sloping floor of the alley-way towards the water-tanks, the dixies banging against his legs as he went. What a job he’d got — cook-house orderly. ’Elp — *helping* a woman. Sort of job he always got. Sort of job he’d had at the dépôt. And in the old *Collingwood*. And Peckover. Peckover! Anyhow they *did* learn about aitches whatever she might think. As he began to stumble back, with the laden dixies now banging his legs more annoyingly than before at each step, he began to mumble over and over a verse that had been Peckover’s chief ally in capturing the elusive aitch:

*“It is not the hunting
That hurts the horses’ hoofs
But the hammer, hammer, hammer
On the high, hard road
That hurts the horsed hoofs.*

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“Silly fool I was. We ’eat them first, miss! Gawd dam’. ’S if I didn’t know!”

About half an hour before supper that evening Hoople had strolled away from the ship and, coming to a rock sufficiently distant to silence the noises of the camp and to promise solitude, sat down, lit a cigarette, and was peacefully reviewing the events of the past forty-eight hours when Delamere’s rich, deep, almost unctuous voice annoyingly shattered his privacy.

“Brooding on the outlook for best sellers?” lowering his tall, clumsy body beside Hoople. “And give me a cigarette for God’s sake. I’ve smoked my week’s supply. Damned nerve of Brooking’s, all this rationing business.”

Hoople merely grunted and passed over a packet from which he’d only taken one. Delamere took one, lit it and said, “Smoke a pipe, don’t you, mostly? May I keep these? Thanks. I’m worse than dead under fifty a day.”

“You look like being dead a lot,” commented Hoople.

“I shall buy them off the men. Pity there’s not a non-smoker among them.”

“If they’ll sell.”

“They’ll sell all right. I’ve already bought thirty each from four of them.”

“You’ll be lucky if they go on selling. I should say they’ll soon come to the conclusion that a packet of fags is without price.”

“Then we’ll have to find other means.” Delamere was leaning forward clasping his knees with his great hands. His heels were touching; his bare feet outspread at right angles. His eyes were closed and he was inhaling deeply and emitting the smoke slowly from his nostrils.

Hoople felt a shiver of repulsion pass over him as he noticed the white, splay feet, vast, distorted, obscenely inhuman.

“Brooking’s damnably insolent,” went on the rich deep voice. “Presuming on a dead office. His commission lapsed when his boat sank, I should say. After all, he lost his ship. That’s as good as being cashiered. Extraordinary I didn’t

think of that before. Why, the oaf ought to be court-martialled instead of running a slave-camp. By the way, I looked up his career when I decided to

come on this infernal trip. He's the complete outsider. No school nor anything else."

"Hope you looked us all up," grunted Hoople. "My own school would need some finding even in Gabbitas's list. It's lucky for us he did lose his ship, if that's what you call it."

"Think so? I'm not too sure. Seems to me buying life at a fairly stiff price. I should say Broadmoor's paradise compared with this. This infernal siren business. I've not been out of bed before eleven for the past fifteen years and I propose kicking against this reveille nonsense before long. And this fantastic time-table of work and meals and work and prayers and God knows what else. We've been granted the boon of life in a dead world and this lout's doing his best to make it worse than death. What the devil's the hurry about? I've probably only got twenty years or so to live and all that's apparently in front of me is the existence of a galley-slave."

"Take a longer view," with a grim smile. "The devil would soon be afoot in an idle camp. And your twenty years might dwindle to twenty weeks." He took out a pipe, filled and lit it. "Brooking's doing the only sane thing he can do, given his training. The only question is: How long can he keep it up?"

Delamere lit a fresh cigarette from his stub. He opened his eyes and looked at Hoople. "What d'you think of our lovely Sylvia's chances?" he asked, withdrawing the cigarette and protruding his fleshy, moist underlip.

"Chances?"

"Yes."

"Chances of what?" irritably.

"Oh, anything you like. Don't be dense, Hoople. Put grossly: Who's going to have her? Or," with a grin, "have her first, shall we say?"

"You'd better ask her," making an effort to disguise the offensiveness of his tone.

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"Or Brooking," not noticing, or refusing to notice, Hoople's tone. "Extraordinary you as a novelist don't take more interest in this perfectly unparalleled situation."

"Well, I don't. And anyhow novels are dead and novelists, too, thank God."

"All men now, eh, Hoople? Men and women. Or rather one woman. Makes the problem so much the more intriguing. Male and female of the

species created He them. And what are we going to do about it? No, don't answer. Only a rhetorical question. Glad you've shed your cultured trappings. Puts the whole subject back to the primitive. *Id est*: If Sylvia were Gorgon herself she'd be a prize worth, well, not exactly dying for, but seeing the other fellow dying for, but as a perfectly lovely piece of young womanhood, she's — blast that siren. Let it wail. Don't get up, Hoople. As I was saying——"

"I'm hungry," getting up hastily. "It'll keep. The longer the better. Wonder what they're giving us to eat. I've recovered an appetite I lost ten years ago." As Delamere unwillingly dragged himself up and fell into a shambling step beside him, "D'you know, Delamere, a month ago if I'd tucked 'away greasy tinned grub an hour before turning-in for the night I'd have been on the operating-table before cock-crow. And already I'm sleeping like a schoolboy and ready to bite chunks off the living rock by breakfast time, too. Queer it should take a world disaster to heal my stomach."

"Man cannot live by food alone," began Delamere, dredging his mind for something apt to carry his voluptuous fancy. "Food's enough at the moment," quickening his pace. "I smell stew and — and——" sniffing loudly, "something else, an elusive deliciousness — my God! Delamere — know what it is? Hot new loaves! The girl's a wonder. D'you know, Delamere, my mother used to make her own bread and I'm seven years old this minute and wearing a sailor suit. *Lord Nelson* in gold letters on the band." He broke into a trot, knocking out his pipe on his palm as he ran on ahead.

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"What a type!" commented Delamere softly to the first faint stars.

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Having helped Priestly and Clark, the two camp orderlies for the day, to wash up after supper and make the cook-house and mess-room shipshape, Sid went off by himself to spend the half-hour before lights out at his favourite pastime of "having a think." After walking quickly for some minutes he lay down at full length behind a tall hummock and, staring up at the star-bright sky, surrendered himself to the play of his mind, a play that so often began by bewildered and angry questionings and ended in some

compensatory adventure of heroism or romance. He had just reached this comforting stage when the approaching sound of footsteps and low voices dragged him reluctantly back to reality. The footsteps stopped on the other side of the hummock. There was a noise of scraping and shuffling. "This isn't too dusty. Wouldn't mind kipping here for the night. Chuck us a fag, Scotty."

Sid drew himself into the deeper shadow of the hummock and lay still listening. He recognised presently the voices of Evan Jones, David Ferguson, Levinsky, Sam Wells and Michael Scott. Levinsky and Scott had at first made most of the conversation, the others being content to smoke and put in occasional words of agreement or mild dissent.

"The Old Man's coming it a bit too thick, if you ask me," grumbled Scott.

"Well, he's coming it on the toffs, too, 'tanyrate, and that's something, mate," said Ferguson. "If he'd only give us a rum ration we'd be jammy."

"I couldn't half blow the froth off a pint o' good old Fremlin's," said Scott softly. "What's the betting he and the toffs don't have a go at the doings when no one's about?"

"Ten to one against with the Old Man," put in Wells. "He don't booze himself and he won't let anyone else. Now, if Scotty or Shiner had the key for five minutes — blimey!"

Shiner Ferguson laughed. "Sure thing, Digger, old mate,

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and no bleedin' heel-taps. And I wouldn't care to trust the sky-pilot with the key neither. What d'you think of the toffs, Ikey?"

"Bloody little," replied Levinsky. "Seen better things in cheese. I'd take on the whole boiling, one down, t'other up."

"What, Seppy an' all?"

"Seppy an' all. If you ask me," went on Levinsky, "barring the Old Man they're about the softest lot of——outside Barnum's. Ought to be in a home, most of 'em."

"Soft and shady like Bridget O'Grady."

"R. Shady's right, Digger boy. That fat-faced Vere de Vere's been up to a bit of no good half his time, I lay."

"Looks likes a dirty dog if you ask me."

"And I wouldn't care to go bail for all old Musgrave's done on the Q.T.," went on Levinsky. "First Lord of the blinking Admiralty! And never

been further'n Southend!"

"What about little Shelly?"

"Best of the bunch he is."

"And Piper?"

"What, 'Oopie? What a voice, eh? Like a kid throwing her first highstrikes. But he's a knowing bird, is Piper. All there up aloft, he is."

"Who'll swap a fag for a wallop on the jaw? What, no one? Have one o' my own, then. That bleedin' siren'll be letting off in a minute. Shan't be sorry for my bit o' shut-eye anyhow. What d'you say, Ikey?"

"Wish my old woman was waiting for me."

"Not 'alf."

"What about Sylviah for a bed-mate?"

"Now you're talking."

"Bit on the skinny side. I like a good armful."

"Not so skinny, neither. As fine a pair o' shanks as I seen anywhere. Yers. If I find her in my blankets I'll not say no."

"What hopes!"

"We're about number ninety-nine in the queue, old son."

"How d'you make that out?"

"If anybody has her it'll be the Old Man or Seppy."

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"The Old Man! Gert! I lay she'd as soon sleep with a dead

"What about Seppy?"

"R. Now he looks like being a bit of all right there, he does."

"Unless Vere de Vere cuts him out. Seen him eyeing her. Don't look the sort that can wait, Vere de Vere don't."

"What a hope he's got. 'Bout as much as Piper."

"Or us."

"You're right. Hard cheddar. What d'you say, Ikey?"

"I says what old Asquith said in Gawd-knows-when: wait and see, he said. Yers. Wait and see. Hark at that siren. Like a stuck pig. Well, pick 'em up."

Sid trailed along some fifty yards behind, not caring whether they saw him or not. He knew if they had seen him behind the hummock they wouldn't have bothered. He was of no account. Might just have toed his backside and told him to hop it. He didn't matter to them nor to the others, the toffs. His mind went drifting back to Medbury with its bigwigs and on

to Peckover where life had been all kow-towing and yes, sir, no, sir; yes, miss, no, miss; and once, when a great, fat, white frog of a woman came: yes, your Grace. It seemed he had always been kow-towing and saluting and saying, yes, sir; no, miss; and had never been of any account. But it wasn't all Peckover's fault. He'd heard Digger Wells say he'd been a Borstal boy: "Spent four years there, but they couldn't tame me. Not bloody likely they couldn't. Give 'em as good as they gave me *and* a bit for luck." He wondered why he couldn't be like Digger Wells. Well, he couldn't, and that was that. He suddenly thought of all the bigwigs, toffs and great ones who must have been killed and yet he'd been left alive. It seemed queer somehow. Not that it was much cop. Not for him, anyhow. He was right out of things. Always had been and always would be. Messing about in a cook-house fetching and carrying for a woman. What was it Evan Jones had said about her? Finest pair o' shanks—— His mind halted abruptly and across his retina passed a swift vision of Sylvia.

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Yes, she was a bit of all right. Lovely, he reckoned. In a swift flash he was back on Keston Banks walking side by side with Daisy Olcott, hot fingers clasped, and in his heart a warm joyousness that even the desolate weeks that were to follow could not steal from his memory. He sighed and quickening his pace, reached Q.I. and clambering up through a gap in the hull, made his way to his bunk and turning in as he was, quickly fell asleep.

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Steadily the camp began to rise during the next few months. The expected difficulties in maintaining discipline did not appear. There was no more than the normal amount of grouching— not entirely confined to the men — but nothing in the way of open insubordination. Hoople certainly initiated a movement for greater freedom, but the revolt was merely sartorial. His discarding of his uniform was probably looked upon by Brooking as by no means entirely against his own interests as leader and he no longer remonstrated when some of the others followed suit and dressed as the men did in trousers or shorts and skirts or slips. By the end of the sixth month, when the camp had begun to take on the likeness of a small hamlet, only Seppings and Brooking himself retained their uniforms.

Rain had returned at the end of six weeks and since then they had been visited with frequent downpours.

The huts and cabins were nearing completion when a violent gale of wind swept over the camp. It was heralded by an inky sky and a crashing thunderstorm that lasted over an hour. Many of the partially-built huts were razed and of those that withstood the ordeal the majority were more or less badly damaged. It merely meant that they had to build better and the whole camp turned to at dawn the next day with surprising zest. It was Hoople who, in the broadening light of that early spring dawn, first noticed what Stiles insisted upon describing as a miracle straight from the hand of God. He strolled over to Brooking, who was busy directing the temporary

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shoring up of some of the more dangerous-looking of the walls.

“What do you want, Hoople?” he asked sharply.

Hoople took him by the arm. “Just a moment, Brooking,” he said quietly. “Come with me a minute.” He walked away, Brooking following him impatiently. Coming to a large rock, Hoople mounted it and beckoned Brooking to his side. “What do you make of that?” he asked, pointing away ahead towards the rising sun.

Brooking shaded his eyes from the level glare. “Make of what? I don’t see anything.”

“The ground, I mean.”

Brooking stared ahead. “What is it you’re driving at?” irritably. “I don’t see anything. Looks darker than usual, if that’s what you mean.”

“Precisely,” with a dry grin. “It *is* darker. Know what it is? No, not manna! But about as good. I strolled over to look ten minutes ago. Well, it’s soil—good rich, black soil.”

“Soil! Nonsense.”

“Well, if it isn’t you can have my tobacco ration for a week.”

“You seem pretty certain. Where the devil did it come from?”

“That’s beyond me. But *how* it got here’s simpler. Unless you can think of another explanation.”

“What’s yours?”

“Brought by the wind. It *was* a wind, I may remind you. About twice the velocity of anything I ever experienced in the old life—and I think I’ve been in most of the windy quarters of the globe. Well, that howling gale lifted soil from somewhere or other and dropped it on us. May have carried

it a thousand miles before dropping it or only a matter of a score or so. *That* we may find out some day or other. The immediate point is that there is soil on the earth in places and we've now a good sample of it scattered about here; by the look of it some dozens of acres."

"Go on." Smiling grimly, "Produce your other rabbit."

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"Why not seeds?"

"*What?*"

"Seeds. There's good rich black soil. And it's lying round four or five inches deep in places. I'm prepared to wager a week's tobacco to a bottle of champagne that with the soil — *in* the soil — that howling gale brought seeds."

"We won't bet on it. In any case, the wine's not mine. But I'm not prepared to believe you, for all that."

"All right. Let's leave it at that. But I hope I'm the man Friday when it comes along."

"Afraid I don't follow you."

"That's wilful refusal to exercise your imagination. And I refuse to help you out. I'll get back to work."

It was Sheldringham who turned out to be man Friday. Early one morning, about three weeks later, he was seen gesticulating like a madman some three hundred yards from the camp. The sound of his excited shouts drifted slowly towards the amazed watchers of his antics. And when a dozen or so hurried over to him they found him bent over a tiny green shoot pushing up from the soil. He was kneeling down staring at the sudden miracle. That he was "blubberin' like a bleedin' kid," in the words of Nobby Clark was not true, but there were certainly traces of tears on his cheeks.

More marvellous perhaps than that tiny shoot were the dreams that were built upon its fragile promise. There was not a man in the camp who did not see their wilderness transferred into a new Garden of Eden, their huts decked with flowers, their tables loaded with fruits and vegetables, trees blossoming and, wildest dream of all, the dawns musical with birds.

And after all it was but the sorriest of unfamiliar weeds. Yet it and its countless fellows during the next few weeks brought beauty and loveliness to a new birth. Nor were all the dreams entirely baseless, although years were to pass before some of them were substantiated.

CHAPTER IV

THE BISHOP'S SERVICES ARE REQUIRED

YEAR ONE — as it was half-facetiously called — drew to an end. The camp was now completed. It consisted of twenty two-roomed huts or cabins of which Brooking's was the only one of any size. There were besides a roomy cook-house, two store-huts, a dining hall, a chapel, a recreation room and a library. The library, with Hoople as librarian, consisted of about fifty books that had been salvaged from amongst the hundred or so volumes that had been brought aboard by the guests. They were obviously "favourite" books, "pct" books, bedside books, those books, often small pocket editions, which travellers always pack as a known and tried stand-by and on whose behalf they are never tired of proselytising. They were *odd* volumes in every sense of the word and included the Bible, a Shakespeare, *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, *Elia's Essays*, *Pepys' Diary*, *Evelyn's Diary*, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, *Reade's Martyrdom of Man*, *Wells's Short History of the World*, *Thomson's City of Dreadful Night*, *The Diary of a Nobody*, *The Golden Age*, *Penguin Island*, *Clarissa Harlowe*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Oxford Book of Verse*, *Tarka the Otter*, *Moby Dick*, *The Compleat Angler*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Southey's Nelson*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *The Decameron*, *The Arabian Nights*, *The Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Way of All Flesh*, *Back to Methuselah*, *Trelawny's Adventures of a Younger Son*, *Bacon's Essays*, *Hahnemann's New Instrument of Healing*, and similar idiosyncratic favourites.

The recreation room was used for physical drill in bad weather and there also took place boxing and wrestling

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tournaments and occasional concerts and sing-songs. Cards (of which some dozen or so packs had been among the salvage) and a few other games were played, all of which were chosen for the scope they allowed for gambling. It is perhaps noteworthy that tobacco had now become the currency of the community, forming the prizes for boxing, wrestling and racing and liquidating all gambling debts. The units were a packet of ten

cigarettes and one ounce of tobacco, and "I'll bet you a packet (or an ounce)," was as familiar as the afore-time bob or pony.

It wanted a week to the end of Year One. It had been a day of blazing sunshine and that evening after supper Sylvia had left Sid and the two orderlies to clear up and had gone off for a stroll in the slightly cooler air of the dusk. For work she had long since adopted shirt and trousers, but during her leisure times she more often than not still wore frocks of which a quite bewildering assortment of over a hundred had been salvaged. When she first adopted the common working clothes she had occasionally on the hottest days worn shorts; but Sheldringham had taken the opportunity of waylaying her and protesting. For so controversial a topic the discussion was perhaps unprecedentedly brief.

"I think you should draw the line there, Sylvia."

"But why, Uncle? Don't be absurd."

"Just for the sake of expediency. Please do think it over and for once be guided by me."

"You're a silly old thing."

That was all that was said. But Sylvia abandoned shorts forthwith, a self-denial that was obviously a disappointment to others besides herself. But, in Hoople's words, what the camp lost in beauty it gained in an atmosphere more conducive to spiritual contemplation. Other views were expressed more pungently.

After walking about a mile, Sylvia sat down in a bed of the withering yellow weed, which now had spread itself luxuriantly over mile after mile of what had so recently been scoured and barren rock. She presently stretched herself out

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and lay for some time looking up at the deepening dark-blue of the sky. As she watched, in isolated ones and twos and in a while in gathering groups, the sudden stars pricked out.

"Breaking camp for the night, Sylvia?"

She sat up, faintly startled, to find Brooking looking down at her.

"You'll be late for lights out," sitting down beside her.

"There'll apparently be two of us. Bad example for the boss to set."

"Who *is* the boss, Sylvia?"

"What?"

"Aren't you?"

"This is a new rôle for you, isn't it?"

"How's that?"

"The enigmatic man."

"All right. Let's talk hard facts."

"I'd rather be getting back."

"We'll do both," getting to his feet and holding out his hand. She ignored the assistance and, jumping up, fell into step beside him.

"There's no great hurry," as she began to forge ahead.

"I thought you were afraid I should be late."

"It wouldn't matter for once. I should be late, too."

"That's just the point."

"All right. That *is* the point, then."

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me, Sylvia?"

"So *that's* the point?"

"It's been the point a long while. Will you?"

"I'll tell you presently. Go on."

"What else do you want me to say?"

"*I* want!" with a faint laugh. "I thought it was you who wanted to talk."

"Look here, Sylvia, there's a lot I might say. I'm not such a fool as to think you don't know it. All of it. It concerns us all. Vitrally. But as far as it concerns me it boils down to the question I asked you."

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"Why not?"

He looked at her quickly but failed to gather any help from the dimly-perceived expression of her face. But hiding his uncertainty he plunged,

"You mean you will?"

"Do I?"

"Don't you?" doubtfully, with a trace of irritation.

"Perhaps. Oh, I don't know. Stop talking about it." They went on for a few minutes in silence. "I'll tell you in the morning," she said suddenly. Again they walked on silently. And then, with a laugh, "Let's make a game of it."

"A what?" startled.

"Oh, a game."

"I don't — but why — how——"

"Oh," throwing out her hands, "just because — just for nothing."

“All right.”

“Is that the lightest tone you can rake up?”

Brooking did not answer and after a moment she went on, “We’ll leave it to your tea at breakfast. If I put no sugar in it I’ll marry you.”

He searched his mind for some light remark that would make him free of her foolishness. But he found nothing and while he dredged the dim waters of childhood she broke into his thoughts with sudden laughter. “Should I have to call you Charley?”

“What you like.”

“I should find Charley abominable. Do you remember Lamb’s plaint when some old bore died, ‘There’s no one left to call me Charley now.’ Something to be thankful for, one would have thought. I’ve always thought that period the saccharine one of English letters, of the masculine kind anyhow. Well, you must wait till breakfast. It’ll only be the first cup, so you’ll suffer no great deprivation to obtain a wife. There’s considerable competition, you know. You’re the twelfth who’s asked me in the last——”

“What! Do you mean some of the men——”

“Of course I do. You needn’t ask for particulars. They

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didn’t get as far as the blunt question but they stood about and eyed me and turned the thing over and over in their minds and sought for words and failed to find them before I hurried away. Such inarticulateness was not, you will guess, shown by some of the other — er — applicants, shall we say.”

“I can imagine as much.” Angrily, “If there’s been any pestering——”

“Let’s talk of something else. I’m sick to death of it. I’d have done better to marry one of you the day after the smash. There’s the siren and we’ve half a mile to go yet. Go on by yourself. I’ll follow later. No, don’t argue. Go.”

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Next morning Brooking found himself waiting with an almost infuriated impatience for his first cup of breakfast tea. There was no order of precedence in being served at meals but he was usually among the first two or three. But this morning his turn was so unusually long in coming that it seemed impossible not to ascribe it to design. At last the orderly came

leisurely towards him, the cup in one hand and a plate of bread and baked beans in the other. So much had been spilled in the saucer that Brooking was tempted to a sharp reprimand. He took the cup and saucer, however, without saying anything and looked over to the far end of the table where Sylvia had just taken a seat. She was not looking at him and he put down his tea without tasting it. And suddenly hesitating in a way that was strange to his accustomed promptness of decision, he found himself unwilling to put his future to the proof. He realised abruptly and with a sense of almost humiliating anxiety how much of his future happiness was at stake. Sylvia's apparently flippant, "You're the twelfth who's asked me," suddenly invaded his recollection with a violent stab of an emotion he had to confess was stark jealousy. Damn them! As for the men's insolence, well, that was easier to manage. It was merely a disciplinary matter, and if they thought themselves numbered among the eligible suitors the sooner they learned the plain facts the better.

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He raised the cup quickly and drank. As his palate savoured with distaste the tepid unsweetened liquid his eyes, looking up over the cup, caught Sylvia's glance. He felt his face burning and was overwhelmed on a sudden with so blind a flood of passion that his body trembled and his teeth rattled against the cup's edge.

He found his appetite gone, pushed the food about upon his plate, accepted a second cup of tea, hot and sweet, gulped it down, and, lighting a cigarette sat quietly smoking, his eyes closed, his mind a chaos of racing tumbling thoughts and bright, vivid, alluringly lovely images. Presently, opening his eyes and finding that nearly everyone had finished, he rapped upon the table, tossed away his cigarette, stood up and, when all were standing, Stiles mumbled his *non nobis* and there was an exodus which left present only Browning, Sylvia and Stiles, Wells, Priestly and the orderlies. Brooking lit another cigarette and sat smoking. After a few minutes only Sylvia and Stiles remained besides himself, the orderlies having gone to stoke-up the fires. Stiles was still ploughing steadily through a vast hunk of bread and jam and had obviously no thought for anything else but the pleasure of the stomach. He was, moreover, nearly the room's length away from Sylvia. Brooking got up and walked up the room towards her. He felt his legs trembling. His mouth was dry. He came to where she sat smoking and stood looking down upon her cropped honey-coloured hair. Never had

she seemed so lovely, so passionately desirable. He bent over her, "Thank you, Sylvia."

She looked up. The Bishop's back was turned. "You'd better kiss me, hadn't you?" she said with mock gravity. "You don't look particularly cheerful."

"When will you marry me?" he asked, his harsh voice barely under control.

"Oh, when you like. Let's get it over and settle down again."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I mean it."

"This afternoon, then?"

She laughed softly. "That sounds more like the skipper!"

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But I didn't mean quite as soon as that. But all right if you want to."

She looked up at him, smiling, and he stooped and kissed her. Her lips were cool, almost cold. He did not notice that, only their softness. He found himself unable to say anything more, scarcely even capable of coherent thought. He put out a shy hand, touched her hair and turning, quickly hurried away.

She watched him out of the room, a faint almost wry smile upon her lips. What precise emotions that smile portrayed she would have found it difficult to say.

Twenty minutes later, Brooking waylaid Stiles some fifty yards from the dining-hall. "Just a few words with you, please, Stiles."

"Go ahead!" puffing at his pipe.

"In your official capacity."

"My what?"

"As a — as our chaplain, shall we say."

"Oh, yes. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Far from it. I want you to marry me and Sylvia this afternoon at two-thirty."

The pipe slipped from the Bishop's teeth. "Good — er — good, good Lord!" he ejaculated. And then, stooping to pick up his pipe so that his face was hidden for a few moments, he said heartily, "Very warm congratulations, Brooking. But you startled me, y'know." Smiling, with forced pleasantry. "Shouldn't do that, y'know, so soon after breakfast, with a man of my habit. God bless my soul! But really, this is sudden, y'know."

Take what little breath I've left away. So you're going to marry our Sylvia. You're a lucky man, Brooking. Realise that? A wonderfully lucky man."

"Yes, I know, Stiles."

"Well," pulling himself together, "I do congratulate you most heartily, Brooking. I'd no idea. Stupid of course. It had to come. And who if not the — er — skipper? At two-thirty o'clock, you said? At two-thirty. Very well. Everything shall be ready. This won't be a working day, then, I take it?"

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"I rather think it will. I'll say nothing till dinner-time. Much the best way, I think. We'll make to-morrow a holiday, and this afternoon, of course, there'll be no work. I think we'll have some sort of a small feast this evening by way of wedding breakfast. Instead of supper. Have it at seven and a sing-song afterwards. Have to crack a bottle or two, I suppose." He spoke in short, abrupt and excited sentences and, seizing Stiles's hand, he shook it warmly. "Thanks, yes, thanks," he said irrelevantly. "Say nothing about it. Make a pleasant little surprise at dinner-time. Thanks again, Stiles." And he hurried away.

"Pleasant!" muttered Stiles, looking after Brooking with an almost dazed expression. "Pleasant! My — my — my — *God!*"

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But after all it was Stiles who broke the news at dinner. He had said the usual grace and some of the diners were about to leave the hall when he held up his hand. "Commander Brooking has asked me to make an announcement," he said, with the trace of a smile on his broad, red face. "Work will not be resumed this afternoon as we have a ceremony in the chapel." He paused for a moment as a crackle of comment broke out, and then went on, "A most pleasant ceremony and one which cannot be altogether unexpected." His conversational tone took on the traditional monotone of church ceremonial. "At half-past two o'clock this afternoon Commander Charles Brooking and Miss Sylvia Lessing will be joined together in the bonds of holy matrimony." He paused again but there was no crepitation of voices now, only an intense strained silence which lasted so long that Brooking nodded to him and rose to his feet. A few isolated faint claps broke the strained quiet. Brooking's voice, harsh, thick and loud, cut into the room like the sudden fretting screech of brakes. "In place of

supper to-night," he said abruptly, "there, will be a somewhat more lavish meal — er — our wedding breakfast. It will be served at seven. Afterwards we hope we shall have some singing. I hope — er — we hope — we

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are sure we shall both have your good wishes on this most — most happy and momentous occasion." He felt he was talking drivel, saying everything but the right thing, cutting the most foolish of figures, but he could find nothing in his mind that did not sound even more inane, more — more — what was the word? Hypocritical. Yes, that was it. He looked round at the cold, unemotional faces turned towards him, half put out his hand almost as if in a gesture of appeal and then, drawing himself up, said, his voice rasping, "That is all now."

The room emptied rapidly. There was no demonstration of any kind. Brooking remained in his place staring across at the empty seats. Sylvia came over to him. They were alone. "Not what one would call a cordial reception," she smiled mockingly.

"No," heavily.

"Don't look so murderous. Did you expect them to jump with joy? You ought to feel proud of the tribute to my worth."

"I expected a more sporting spirit."

"Don't be silly, Charles, Charley — oh, why were you given such a perfectly hopeless name? Charles is quite impossible to say in any other tone than the one we used to servants, when there *were* servants, and Charley makes me think of a spaniel. I shall have to call you Brooks."

"Of Sheffield," with a grim smile.

"Is that an allusion? Don't explain. I'm sure it's someone dull. What are you going to be married in?"

"My uniform."

"How austere! Then, of course, I must be also in my working duds. Or do you think shorts——"

"Don't Sylvia. I'd like you to wear that silver-grey frock you wore at the last sing-song."

"But it doesn't suit me a bit by daylight, especially in this glare. I simply can't."

"Well, will you wear it to-night at — at — supper? The blinds will be drawn and the lights lit to make things more convivial. I'd like you to."

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“All right. Now don’t ask me what I’m going to wear for the marriage, because I don’t know. There isn’t a rag really. I ought to have had a week and then I’d have knocked up something, as Flagg says. It’s nearly two now. If I can’t find something mildly stunning you’ll have to postpone the whole affair. And if I have to sleep on it, Brooks, I’ll probably not marry you at all.”

There were no absentees at the ceremony and nothing of a disturbing or disquieting kind happened. Nor, except for Delamere’s suggestion that the wedding-hymn should be *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, was there any suggestion of facetiousness or ribaldry. The attitude of everyone was, for the time being, a sort of philosophic acceptance of an accomplished fact. There was, moreover, the promise of a hilarious evening with an abundance of food, an extra ration of tobacco and cigarettes and, for the first time, a certain amount of wine and spirits. With the sole exception of a few medicinal doses of rum and brandy, the camp had been completely “dry” from the beginning.

The tinned-food resources of the stores had been ransacked for the feast and from five o’clock until seven Flagg, assisted by Digger Wells, Shiner Ferguson, Nobby Clark and Sid, had sweated to make the feast an unforgettable one. Stripped to the waist in the close, stifling heat of the cook-house, they kept the fires blazing for the dixies and the ovens, while the sweat ran down faces and arms and, as they stooped over pots and pans, trickled from their finger-tips. At ten minutes to seven they were relieved by four waiters — Hoople, Musgrave, Levinsky and Priestly — to give them the opportunity of washing and changing before the meal began. The feast was a triumph of the cannery. There were roast duck, turkey and woodcock; broiled rabbit and chicken; sausages, tongue, peas, asparagus, pears, cherries, strawberries, peaches and apricots. There were tinned cream and butter, with an abundance of bread, biscuits and cheese. Only flowers were lacking, the canning industry having never visualised a world without

them. And by way of liquid there was half-a-bottle of champagne apiece and, with the coffee, the choice of a gill of brandy, whisky or rum. Stomachs which had known no alcohol for twelve months responded hilariously to the forgotten joys of liquor and by the time the extra ration of a packet of cigarettes or an ounce of tobacco was served the dining-hall

rattled and crackled with shouts, laughter and snatches of song. Stiles, rising to speak, received a welcome that went to his head more than the accustomed wine and moved him to a sententious gravity of unseemliness that would have embarrassed a soberer assembly.

His fleshy red face shone, his large nose and bald high forehead shone even more resplendently; he leaned forward, his hands clasped behind his back, his characteristic stoop accentuated by a slight unsteadiness and surveyed the convives with eyes of moist benevolence. His booming voice took on an incredible richness. A chaos of emotions stirred in his slightly fuddled brain and moved him to oratorical magniloquence. "That day," he said, rocking slightly backwards and forwards, "upon which the hand of God delivered us from the maw of the sea and the holocaust which had overtaken man, was a memorable one in the history of mankind. To-day is no less memorable. It is indeed a day of vaster import. For here is the genesis of the new world. It is the profound hope of us all that this marriage shall be fruitful. As God on that day when the waters drew off from the land admonished Noah to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, so I, God's servant, do so admonish in His name this man and this woman, His beloved children. For unless this marriage be blessed with offspring the passing of our brief life-span must see the world desert of humankind and the mighty plan of God brought to nought. Can it be thought that the great purpose of God which delivered us from the perils of the sea shall now be brought to nothing? It is unthinkable. Our need, the need of all of us, the need of the world, the need of God Himself, is new life, children, boys and girls." He closed his eyes for a moment and passed his hand over his forehead, swaying unsteadily.

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"Boys and girls," he went on and then, at a sudden loss for words, he repeated, "boys and girls." He paused for so long that his listeners stirred and shifted uneasily and noisily in their seats. There was some laughter, the rattling of mugs and a voice that hiccuped and shouted loudly. "Girls is, hie! right." And at this there was more laughter and someone began to sing drunkenly, *Put Me Amongst the Girls*. Stiles opened his eyes, drew himself upright and then, raising his hand, he said with recovered steadiness of voice and poise, "Let us then in God's name drink to the health, long life and fruitfulness of the bride and bridegroom." He stooped and raised his

mug and the toast was honoured with a crashing of cheers and shouts and laughter.

Brooking merely stood up, smiled gravely and bowed. He realised that the allowance of spirits had been too generous and that any attempt to reply to the toast might stir the general atmosphere of tipsy sleepiness into a dangerous pandemonium by one of those swift transitions which are among the least lovable traits of Bacchus. Any notion of a sing-song was forthwith abandoned, for already some of the guests had fallen forward with heads upon arms, snoring and snorting on the borders, or over them, of vinous slumber; some were talking loudly into one another's dimly perceived faces, while here and there others, with set lips and staring eyes, moved with unsteady determination towards the door, intent upon reaching the haven of bed before disaster overtook them.

And the dining hall being at last cleared, Brooking and Sylvia made their way to his hut.

But not everyone was defeated and brought low by the bowl. Brooking had drunk nothing but water and Sylvia had contented herself with a mere taste of the champagne. They sat talking for a long while before going to bed. Hoople, who liked liquor but loathed its deadening effect on his mental powers, had been equally abstemious, and Sheldringham, having limited himself to a small mug of champagne and a little brandy with his coffee, was entirely unaffected. These two having gone separately for a stroll in the twilight met unexpectedly

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and walked back slowly together talking over the day's happenings.

They passed on the way, but did not notice, two men sitting smoking under a rock. They were the sandy-haired little Scotsman, Shiner Ferguson, and the Cockney, Michael Scott, who, both hard-bitten boozers, had not only swallowed their own share of the liquor but a dozen or so heel-taps without the slightest effect on their sobriety.

"Wouldn't mind giving a month's fags to be in the Old Man's boots to-night, Shiner, eh?"

"Ay, and a bit more an' all. She's a snug lass and I wish her all the best. *And* the Old Man, come to that."

"Well, damn his eyes, I don't Shiner, old son. No, not on your life I don't."

"Somebody had to have her and he's Skipper."

“*Was.*”

“How d’you mean?”

“Afore the blinkin’ world blew up or blew off. He was then. But to *my* way of thinkin’, there ain’t no Skipper now. *And* I’m not the only one’t thinks it. No, not by long chalks, old brown son. What’s more, where there’s a bit o’ skirt about one man’s ’s good’s another.”

“That’s for the lass to say, Scotty boy. *And* she’s said it. Chose the Skip out of the whole bunch and there you are.”

“Did she? P’raps.”

“P’raps my——’Course she did. Even the Skip can’t marry a lass unless she’s willing.”

“P’raps, mate, and p’raps not. But if you ask me, she’d sooner ’ve had Seppy. Any wench with half an eye would. Or Flaggy.”

“Some hopes. Flaggy didn’t get a look in there. He’s only one of us.”

“Oh? Mean to say we’re out of it any old how?”

“Bet your life. If it hadn’t been the Old Man it’d ’a’ been Seppy or Vere de Vere or Piper or Shelly or the sky-pilot. But the likes of us, old son — nah pooh!”

“That’s what *they* think. But what about what *we* think?”

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“All right, thinking won’t hurt you.” Grinning, “Anyhow, the Skip’s got her and good luck to him. If you want a bit o’ skirt, Scotty, old son, you’ll have to wait till the kids grow up.”

“What? *Their* kids?”

“That’s it.”

“Yep. An’ s’posing there ain’t any, eh? What’s the price of dummies then, eh, old mate? Or *on* ’y boys. How about that?”

“Hard cheddar on us, that’s all, Scotty boy. Can’t get blood out of a stone, y’know.”

“Blood and stone be damned. ’Tain’t a case of blood and stones, old brown son. If a cork don’t fit a bottle you get another cork. Got me? And if *that* don’t fit why, blimey, you get another. And go on till one does fit. Got me?”

“I got you, mate. I’ll play it on my old concertina next sing-song.” Singing, with exaggerated nasality:

*"If yer cork don't fit yer bot-tel
Get another blinkin' cork.*

How's that?"

"O.K. *And* common sense, too. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"P'raps. Or p'raps not. Tell you what I'll do with you, Scotty, old son. Give us a packet of gaspers now and I'll hand over fifty packets the day you're tied up to Mrs. Skip. How's that?"

"Some blinkin' hopes you have, Shiner."

"Some hopes is about right." Grinning, "My hopes *and* yours. *I'm* not worrying. Not me. If I could have the key of the boozier anyone can have the lass."

"Why not a bit o' both? 'Member old Marie Lloyd's song: *A little of what y' fancy does y' good?* What about *that*, eh, old mate?"

"Never heard her."

"Well, I never did neither. Not *her* exactly. Before my time. But we had a record. Yers. A little of what y' fancy does y' good."

"Strewth! I've got a thirst on me. Wonder if any of the doings was left over?"

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"Some hopes. Be a hell of a time before our next drink, old sailor. Adam's ale now. Better be getting back, hadn't we?" Wistfully, "Might be a drop o' the short lying about somewhere. *Might*. And might not." Suddenly brightening, "May get a booze-up under a year anyway."

"Oh? How's that?"

"Nine months, say."

"You're right!" With a hoarse chuckle, "Out of a blasted c'ristening mug."

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"A queer day, Hoople," said Sheldringham, a glowing cigarette between his lips and his eyes on the ground. As they strolled along he had been watching the odd manner in which Hoople turned in his feet and he remembered with amusement how in the early days that physical grotesquerie had intensified his feeling of dislike, a dislike which had

vanished with the passing months and been replaced by a warm friendliness.

Hoople turned his head and his small bright eyes under the thick black eyebrows peered into Sheldringham's face. "Very queer," he agreed with a dry little laugh. "Although," he went on after a moment's silence, "I don't know why we should find it so. In fact, the really odd thing is that it has been so long delayed."

"I suppose so. Brooking's a damned lucky man. I've known Sylvia since she was three and she's fine right through. I'd rather it'd been you, Hoople."

"Good Lord! What chance did I stand? I've no illusions about myself. I should have thought young Seppings was the man to take a girl's eye. And no bad choice, either. Despite his rather overpowering good looks, his drawl and his grin, he's a youngster I'd be glad to have by my side if there were trouble afoot."

"I thought so, too, Hoople. Pretty clear what he felt about it. He was looking hipped in the chapel."

"Oh, yes," shrugging his shoulders, "but weren't we all,

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saving," with a quick smile, "your avuncular presence, in *that* boat, from Stiles down to young Larkins. Not much use blinking that incontestable fact."

"I suppose not. What a howling mess Stiles made of his homily or whatever he intended it to be. The wretched thing about boozing is its humiliating clownishness."

"I daresay. But what I object to is the false sense of values it gives, dangerously false to anyone who has to depend upon his brain or his hands or a partnership of both. But it's struck me that you can always depend upon Stiles making an ass of himself when he's touching upon what he would describe as the essential and basic facts of life. And he's always seemed to me even worse than he was to-day when he's been talking to men only. My job, I'm afraid, has led me into the presumptuous habit of docketing and pigeon-holing my fellow men. I pinned my specimens down and studied them through a lens and in doing so probably missed, like the naturalist with his dead butterflies, nearly all that was fine and lovely."

"So you pinned Stiles down," smiling.

“Perhaps. I pigeon-holed him, anyhow, along with all the others of his tribe I’ve met in an inquisitive and captiously-critical life. Do you know what I’ve found is their lowest common denominator?”

“Whom d’you mean — bishops?”

“Well, often enough. For the simple reason that the careers of many bishops closely follow the lines of Stiles’s: fifteen or so years as form and house-masters and then a return to his boyhood’s school as Headmaster.”

“And that common denominator?”

“A fretting sense of a lack of virility when in men’s company.”

“H’m. I doubt if facts would bear you out. Eton, Harrow and Rugby have all traditions of floggers who seemed to be virile to an overpowering extent.”

“I rather fancy that very fact lends support to my view rather than the reverse. But let’s drop Stiles. He was certainly right about children. His boys and girls! Rather funny Jones’s

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hiccup. And apt enough. It’s certainly girls we need if we’re going to survive.” He rubbed his blue jowl reflectively. “Even with the luckiest outcome of the marriage there’s going to be a pretty long wait before there’s any more wiving. I suppose it’s my romantic temperament and a life-long habit of smelling melodrama a mile off, but I’m decidedly amazed there’s been no trouble on this woman question.”

“I fancy most of us are surprised over that, Hoople. It’s a good thing something definite’s happened.”

“I wonder.”

“You think?”

“Well, I’ve not really thought it out. In fact, I’ve shoved the thought out of my mind whenever it intruded. But to be quite candid I’m pretty positive that sooner or later there’ll be trouble over Sylvia. Whether this marriage will postpone or hasten it is so open to argument that I could take either side with equal assurance of that side being the right one. But I’ve not really faced it at all.”

“None of us has. I agree there’s bound to be trouble, but I think Brooking’s marriage will postpone it. Possibly also if they have children quickly and girl children that may postpone it still further.”

“And if the marriage is barren?”

Sheldringham spread his small slim brown hands in a gesture that interpreted his mind better than any verbal reply could have done. When next he spoke it was with startling irrelevance. "Delamere seems to have dropped out — er — hasn't he?"

Hoople shrugged his shoulders. "Making himself matey. But dropping out. H'm. I don't know. He never seemed to be *in* with anyone except himself."

"I thought you were on very good terms with him in the beginning."

"No. We walked together. But I never got one inch into his mind. I began to believe he hadn't one. As for getting into mine, he never began to make the attempt. He seems to have been content with top surfaces all his life. Perhaps I misjudge

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him. But I'm afraid he's the one man of all of us that I don't find congenial, likeable at all. As for the other business, well," again shrugging his shoulders, "I doubt if we can improve upon the traditional attitude of ignoring it till it hits you in the face."

"I suppose so. Whenever it was that the human animal acquired reason he acquired a dubious and damnably uncomfortable bedfellow, Hoople."

Hoople laughed. "Not letting present facts and future possibilities keep you awake, are you? I faced all eventualities, or I flattered myself that I did, the first few days after the smash and having once concluded, to my own satisfaction, that what any or all of us could do to alter the march of things was negligible, I pushed the whole lot right down among the other litter and lumber in my mind. And' there it stays."

"You're lucky to have the knack. And a wise one. For all my mental forebodings and frettings have led me nowhere. About the only truth I've thoroughly grasped is that tobacco is the greatest boon of life."

"And that's only a relative truth."

Sheldringham laughed. "If I knew precisely what you meant by that I should probably disagree. The siren seems somewhat overdue — a thing it never seems in the morning. Is that also only a relative truth?"

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CHAPTER V

APHRODITE AWARDS THE APPLE

THE two years that followed Brooking's marriage with Sylvia were years of discovery, years which brought the community surprisingly unexpected gifts but which also in the end brought them to the inescapable conclusion that they were indeed the sole survivors of the human race upon the earth. It also brought them to a decisive act which, in the opinion of most, was long overdue.

Slowly the sea began to return. About the middle of the Year Two a party consisting of Musgrave, Flagg, Priestly and Fish were out on one of the regular routine exploration expeditions. They had reached a point some forty miles S.S.E. of the camp and were making preparations to stay for the night before setting out at dawn on the return journey. They were at the summit of a long steep declivity, by Flagg's reckoning nearly one thousand feet above the camp level. It was late summer and the sun, low down, shone vividly red through a gathering mist. Priestly and Fish were preparing supper while

Musgrave and Flagg pitched tent. Musgrave straightened himself from fixing one of the guy ropes and turned to stare into the sunset. He took Flagg by the arm and pointing towards the S.W., said quietly, "What d'you make of that, Flagg?"

"Water, unless I'm a Dutchman," replied Flagg.

"If it's not the sunset reflected in water then I'm damned if I know what it is. Pity we can't get up any higher."

"*You* win," grinned Flagg. "About five feet, anyhow. Hop up." He stooped. "Climb up." And as soon as Musgrave was astride his shoulders he raised himself upright. "Any luck?"

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"It's water all right. Stretches to the horizon. It's the sea come back. Right. Lower me down. Sorry I can't return the compliment."

Flagg dropped him easily to the ground. "What about it?"

"We'll strike tent. Pity we were in such a damned hurry to pitch. How's supper, Priestly? Good. Well, we're thinking of pushing straight back to camp after supper. What d'you two say?"

“Suits me,” replied Priestly, while Fish contented himself with a nod.

They set off an hour later and reached camp an hour before noon the next day, dog-tired and heavy with sleep. While they ate before turning in Brooking listened to Musgrave’s story told between bites and yawns and within an hour of their return Brooking, Jones, Ferguson and Clark had set off in Thor. Thor was a small caterpillar car that Flagg, Fish, Clark and Scott had built with incredible ingenuity from the engines of Q.I. In appearance it was absurdly, almost hilariously grotesque and might have been built by an insane inventor working from the design of a drunken comic draughtsman. But it went. Hoople, with some aptness, had christened it Thor. With creakings and screechings and an intermittent vast noise of thunder from its labouring guts it swayed and jolted along at a more or less steady ten miles an hour and had been used occasionally by exploring parties. Only their limited supply of fuel prevented its more frequent use. Flagg and his assistants had also, in their own words, put the small motor-boat into commission and she had lain for some months oiled and ready under her tarpaulin, waiting for the sea that, it seemed, would never come. They had christened her *Columbus*.

Brooking and his party were away for three days. They returned with news that stopped work for the rest of the day. They had found sea. But, more than that, it was several miles to the N.N.W. of the point where its glitter had been seen by Musgrave and as far as they could judge was slowly and steadily moving in that direction. “Before the year’s out,”

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Brooking said, “we’ll have the boat afloat.” This proved an optimistic prophecy and it was not until the early summer of the Year Three that *Columbus*, with Seppings at the tiller and Clark and Levinsky as crew, went chugging out over the newcome waters one misty dawn on her first voyage. By the end of that year, by sea and land, they had extended the area of exploration to several hundred miles in various directions and it was only their urgent need to husband their scanty stock of fuel which had prevented longer voyages. And they had had amazing, unbelievable finds. The discovery of scattered patches of grass with a few wildflowers had been the first fruits of one of Thor’s earliest trips and later more distant expeditions had returned with shoots of corn, water-melon and a dozen varieties of weeds and wildflowers. During the late summer of Year Three they had eaten bread made from their own corn.

But of any signs of other life there was none, nor any vestiges of the ruins of human dwelling-places. By the end of the third year there was none amongst them still optimistic enough to nurse the hope of finding other survivors of the world disaster.

And with the dying of that hope, the marriage of Brooking and Sylvia became of supreme and vital importance. It had been childless and after two years at first patiently, later with mildly expressed disappointment, and finally with blunt outspokenness, the camp had begun to voice its dissatisfaction with Brooking's poor display in his self-chosen and self-appointed rôle of begetter of a new world. And upon New Year's Day of Year Four criticism passed into action.

There were no fewer than three meetings upon the matter. The first was by the very nature of its personnel abortive; the second came to a more or less definite decision and the third finally put that decision into action.

The first meeting was called by Levinsky and was not entirely representative, for only Wells, Ferguson, Clark, Jones, Fish and Scott turned up. Two others looked in but left almost at once: Joseph Dixon, one of the Cockney members

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of the crew, and Fred Archer, the dumpy Suffolk man, a pollarded Goliath, whose mighty shoulders and iron-muscled arms would have made him, but for lack of inches, more than a match for Flagg.

Levinsky having called the meeting, elected himself into the chair and wasted no time or decorum in getting down to brass tacks. "I've called this meeting," he said, "to talk about the Old Man and his Trouble and Strife and if anyone's got anything to say we'll be glad to hear it—when I'm done."

"Spit it out, Jewy boy. What's the news? One in the box?"

"That's just what there *ain't*, and that's the blinkin' point."

"Meaning the Skip ain't got the right key?" grinned Jones.

"Meaning just that, mate. Or, to put it more politely for the sake of Chips," with a leer in the direction of the taciturn Cornishman, Fish, "the Old Man's been married two year and he can't do the trick. And as our sky-pilot said at the cere-mony it was to do the trick that he got spliced for." Mimicking, in a voice that vainly tried to equal Stiles's fruity vocables, "Our crying need, dear brothers and sisters, the need of the world, almighty Gard's need is boys and gels, 'specially gels."

“And so say all of us, Jewy!” shouted Clark. “But where are they? Perjuce the girls.”

“What d’you take me for, Nobby — a bleedin’ conjurer? But I get your point. And it’s my point. *Our* point one and all, I reckon. I put it to the meeting: Do we need girls? Those in favour. Blimey! Carried *unan.* That being so, the next point is how to get ’em.”

“Tell us, Jewy, *we* don’t know,” grinned Ferguson lewdly.

“Ask the sergeant of marines!” shouted Scott, alluding to a hoary service joke.

“‘Bout the one thing he *didn’t* know,” said Fish sourly, speaking for the first time and achieving unintentionally an amazing *bon mot*.

“Judgin’ by what he done you’re right, Chippy,” replied Ferguson, alone of them all completely savouring the jest.

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“Hey! Order!” snapped Levinsky good humouredly. “Less bleedin’ chanty and more pull. Point is what’s to be done?”

“Shiner knows a song about it,” chuckled Scott. “Go on, Shiner boy, sing ’em your ditty about the cork and the bot-tel.”

“I’ve heard it,” interrupted Levinsky with a twisted grin, “so we’ll cut it out. Singin’ it any way. But if the meetin’ wants it in plain English why here it is: If the cork don’t fit the bottle, why, get another blinkin’ cork. That right, Shiner?”

“On the nail, Jewy boy.”

“Well, and that’s it, mates. The cork don’t fit and that’s that. In other words Mrs. Skip wants a new bedmate and it’s up to us to find him.”

“Let’s make a sweep of it, Ikey,” laughed Clark. “My packet goes on Seppy.”

“Seppy my—— Orficers have had their go. It’s now the turn of the good old lower deck ratings.”

“What about yourself, Jewy?” jeered Ferguson.

“Right-o, boy. Now, then, what about your old pal Ikey?”

“Chuck it!” shouted Jones. “We don’t want the blinking camp over-run with little sheenies. Nah pooh on you, Jewy!”

“You put a sock in your gab, old brown son,” flushing angrily. “Your opinion ain’t been asked—yet.”

“I’ll put something a bit harder’n a sock in yours in a couple of seconds,” shouted Jones angrily, getting to his feet. “If you want——”

“Shut up, you two pugs!” interrupted Ferguson. “Let’s talk a bit o’ sense and you can fight it out afterwards.” Cries of, “Go on, Shiner!” encouraged him and he continued: “I’m going to say the same thing to-day as I said nearly two year ago to Scotty and that is: Some hopes. And if you want to hear it again, why: Some hopes. And if you don’t comprey what that means I’ll tell you. Chuck us a fag, Chippy boy; you’re the only kind-hearted bastard left in the world. Thanks, old son. Remind me on ration day and I’ll give you,” lighting up and puffing slowly, “the picture. Well, here’s the straight

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griffin, and if you don’t like it you can go to the Zoo and watch the monkeys.”

“Spit it out, Shiner!” growled Levinsky. “Where d’you think you are? ’Ouse o’ Commons?”

“Monkey House if you blinkin’ well like it,” grinned Ferguson. “Well, here’s the straight griffin: Any of us from Flaggy down to Slushy Larkins have about as much chance of splicin’ Mrs. B. as a celluloid monkey’s got of finding snowballs in Hell. I’m not going to argue the blinkin’ point because it’s not worth it. And,” getting up and moving away, “I’d sooner listen to a Glasgow copper blowing off than listen to a lot of cackle about it. So long.”

This opinion was so obviously that of the others that within three minutes Levinsky was left to his own devices, which, for some considerable time afterwards, consisted of muttering, swearing and searching about for fag-ends.

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The second meeting was unsummoned. It was rather a fortuitous coming together than formal meeting. Hoople and Sheldringham in the leisure half-hour before supper were lounging on a sparse grass patch a few hundred yards from the camp smoking and chatting, when Delamere shambled up on his immense feet and, dropping down beside them, made his usual request for a cigarette. He made no attempt to join in the very desultory conversation, which presently dropped and the three smoked in silence. But after some minutes Musgrave and Stiles came along and Musgrave, as they approached, sang out boisterously, “Holding a sub-

committee? What's on the agenda?" he added, as he and Stiles lowered themselves heavily on to the grass.

"Alarming increase of obesity in the camp," smiled Hoople, his glance flitting from the plumpness of Musgrave to that of Stiles.

"You and Sheldringham are skinny enough for the whole lot of us," chuckled Musgrave, complacently patting his paunch. "You look a pair of dyspeptic conspirators, and now

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I come to think of it one's always surprising you two hob-nobbing and whispering in odd corners. What's the plot, Cassius? Out with it."

"Plotting to have your rations cut down, including cigarettes, which will be given to Delamere; he's never any of his own."

Delamere smiled amiably but said nothing.

"Talking of cigarettes," said Musgrave, "d'you know every time I open a packet I get a stab when I take out the picture. The last thing my little daughter said to me before I set out on that unholy cruise was: 'Save me all your pictures, Daddy.'"

"Don't be morbid, Musgrave. You'd better give up smoking if it takes you like that. We ruled all that sort of thing out hundreds of years ago."

"All right, Hoople. My apologies all round. But," with a grim smile, "I still save all my pictures."

"The devil you do!" laughed Hoople. "Well, so do I."

"You needn't look so puffed up about it," drawled Delamere. "Sheldringham not only saves his but cadges theirs from the men or pinches them when they're asleep. Thank God I've other hobbies. Whom are you collecting 'em for, may I ask?" Sarcastically, "The very hypothetical offspring of the Skipper and Mate?"

No one replied and it was borne in upon every man there that the whole atmosphere had suddenly changed, grown tense with emotion, as if the whole events and all their thoughts of the last two years had converged and drawn together into one bright vivid pin-point of light to which the eyes of their minds were drawn with fascinated expectancy. Each seemed to be waiting breathlessly for another to break the silence.

"You put it rankly, Delamere," said Hoople quietly, "but there may be something in your suggestion."

"Christening gifts in the Greek Kalends, eh?" grinned Delamere.

"Don't let's beat about the bush," broke in Musgrave

abruptly; “let’s have the thing out in the open now it’s broached. Any objection, anybody? Good. Shall I go on or will someone else? What about you, Stiles?” Smiling grimly. “There’s a good precedent for you, you know.”

“The more reason why someone else should take a turn,” replied Stiles, knocking out his pipe and hunting in his pockets for his pouch. “Go ahead, Musgrave.”

“All right. Well, briefly and bluntly the marriage that took place two years ago has been a failure from the one vital point of view that concerns us all and with us the future of the human race. Any dissent from that? Good again. The only question that remains then is what’s to be done. Any suggestions? What do *you* say, Stiles?”

“I have given a lot of serious thought to this matter,” replied Stiles, with grave sententiousness, “during the last few months, and my considered opinion as a man and as a servant of God is that the marriage should be dissolved. What is your view, Sheldrington?”

“I agree absolutely. There is no alternative. I fancy Hoople is in agreement.”

Hoople nodded. “With the corollary, of course, that a second marriage shall take place at once.”

There was a murmur of general assent.

“Does the corollary include the name of the lucky man?” asked Delamere with a trace of mockery in his tone.

“That,” said Musgrave sharply, “is not the immediate point at issue.”

“No? Well, what is?”

“The annulment, I take it,” put in Hoople. “From the clerical or shall we say ecclesiastical point of view, Stiles, annulment meets the case more closely than dissolution, doesn’t it?”

“It’s a nice point, Hoople. I’d like to hear it argued before an ecclesiastical court by two really first-rate men.”

“Better leave the precise description to Brooking, hadn’t we?” commented Sheldrington. “Assuming he agrees,” he added, pulling at his thin drooping moustache.

“Let’s assume black’s white,” mocked Delamere, “and see

where *that* leads us. Does anyone seriously think Brooking will listen for a minute to the proposal?"

"It's a case of *force majeure*," commented Musgrave grimly.

"Quite. Brooking having the only automatics in the camp."

"You forget Seppings."

"Seppings!" with a shrug. "I thought this was a strictly non-service job. But I confess I forgot the languorous lieutenant. I'm afraid my interest is beginning to wane. In fact——"

"Look here," interrupted Hoople sharply, "it wants only a few minutes to supper. I vote we cut any further cackle among ourselves but speak to Brooking at supper and ask him if he'll meet us in Stiles's hut after the meal, as we've a matter we want to discuss with him. Until we've put the thing squarely to him and know his mind on the matter, we're merely beating the air. Is that agreeable? Right. Now who'll speak to him? Shall I? All right. Then let's toddle back and get some grub into us."

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Hoople had found Brooking very willing to meet them, although apparently unaware what was afoot, and as Stiles had agreed to open the discussion it was he who stood up to speak when they were all comfortably settled. At Stiles's rising the air of emotional constraint intensified and in a sudden flash and before a word was spoken Brooking realised what was coming. He sat back a little stiffly in his chair. For a while he followed Stiles with close attention — then his thoughts began to drift away until Stiles's voice became no more than a booming remote monotone heard but no longer listened to.

"This is a distressing matter, my dear Brooking," began Stiles awkwardly, "and let us assure you at once that only after the gravest and most careful thought and consideration have we brought ourselves to lay it before you. Two years ago, with the good wishes of every man in the camp, and equally with their most fervent hope of its outcome, you entered upon your married life. We were glad of the good fortune that had befallen you and of the promise of great happiness. No man

grudged it you on that day and no man since has watched its increase with other feelings than those of gladness. But that hope with which you entered

upon your new life, a hope shared most profoundly by us all, has, alas, not been fulfilled and it seems to us that its fulfilment now is so doubtful that in the vital interests of humanity we can no longer afford to postpone what may appear to you at first blush an unwarrantable interference. Bluntly, we dare not wait. Two years ago our great and pressing need, if we were to survive, was children. To-day that need is imperative.”

It was here that Brooking, recovering a little from the first stunning shock of realisation, began to allow his mind to drift. It no longer mattered what Stiles was saying. He knew it all and he knew what presently they would ask him to do. For the moment he found it impossible to force his mind to think clearly and coherently, to marshal his facts, to gather his forces to fight. He must have time to rest, to relax, before he summoned his powers to stand by him. And so he let his mind wander. But it was the wandering of mingled dream and nightmare; dreams lit by incredible loveliness; nightmares haunted by a sense of dreadful desolation and unending loss.

All his life before his marriage with Sylvia went racing by in small vivid images of himself in a thousand diverse situations, from early childhood onwards to the moment when they stood together in the ramshackle chapel beside the skeleton of the submarine. They were grey, unhappy images. Somehow among all these thronging racing recollections there were but few he could recall with gladness. He had been up against it most of his time. Poverty had been the keynote. It was poverty that had made his school days a drudgery, tying him to the grind of textbooks during the playtime of other boys. Yes, he had won his scholarships, but at what expense of spirit only those other poor devils in the same boat could know. But poverty was not to be knocked out so easily as all that. He won perhaps that first exhausting round but poverty won the others. It followed him into the Navy, dogging his footsteps, for ever at his heels, forbidding this, denying that,

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and yet always after each blow whispering some cunning sophistry, some inspired and dazzling lie to urge him on to further combat. Well, at least he went on. He stuck it out. He saw youngsters promoted over his head and bit on that bullet without a word. He had had to bite on many bullets. Well, he bit and kept silent. It tightened his mouth into a grim line and battened down the hatches on laughter, and much else that was fine and joyous.

Madrali, the Snotties had called him, after a vast scowling mountain of a wrestler then much in the eye of the sporting public. And if it had batted down the hatches on laughter it had opened others to release less gracious things. So that when the plum came — it was a plum, Commander of Q.I., there was no denying that — it was almost without taste, savourless. His mouth was sour. Perhaps if there'd been someone to be glad about it it might have been different. But marriage had been one of those things forbidden him. So he had gone without. No great deprivation, maybe. Love and passion and romance were probably all frauds. He'd seen enough of life at forty to realise that. Not cynicism at all. Cynicism being a youthful complaint, rather comically so, like German measles. No, his wasn't cynicism but merely the looking of the facts of life in the face by a man of maturity and experience, a man who by birth, by training, by circumstance, by reason of that sense of values that comes from standing-up four square to the buffets of life — well, yes, perhaps it had not been so much standing up as getting up again after a knockout, one of poverty's knockouts — anyhow, by all these he had been gifted with the clear cold vision that saw things as they were and not in a warm glowing romantic mist.

And then, suddenly, like some miraculous gift dropping down from nowhere, came his marriage with Sylvia. And within a month he knew that all those cynical stories of marriage were just rotten lies; that those jeers at love and romance, those sneers and poo-pooings at the happiness of a man and a woman were but the sad bitter jibings of the unlucky. He had come to know so great and unbelievable happiness that at times he could imagine himself alone in such an experience

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in the whole history of mankind. Yes: And then those other times when he was fretted by the thought that perhaps it was all a swiftly passing dream; and if not that then Sylvia did not love him. How could she? Certainly not as he loved her. Even if she did, surely it could not last. Life couldn't change so suddenly, so incredibly as all that. How could Life, which so far had reserved for him its roughest buffets, its bitterest and most biting slings and arrows, change so suddenly into the lavish giver of so much loveliness, so much passionate gladness. Sheer sentimentality to think like that. Wasn't that what it was called? Sloppiness. Maudlin uxoriousness. Well, damn them all! Let them call it what they would. He would confess it in all its sentimentality, shout it out to the world. Pity the world was dead and

couldn't hear. But he'd shout it all the same. He loved her. Loved her. Did they hear that? Loved the ground she walked on, the air she breathed, her eyes, her hair and sweet cool lips, her breasts, her beautiful body, every inch of her. God! How lovely she was. And how lovable, how desirable. It would all pass, would it? A mere emotional storm due to physical excitement. A pretty little piece of make-believe staged by Nature and played by two bodies; a mere trick of the hungry flesh. The liars. It would not pass. It could not. Well, supposing it did. Hadn't he had it, this lovely moving experience? Could all those hoary jibes rob him of one moment of it? Let them jeer and mock, the pitiful unhappy fools. They were dead now, of course; but their folly still lived on. How good God had been to him. And how often in his heart he had laughed at that pathetic fallacy of a belief in God. As if any but a God could have made Sylvia. Made any woman. Whom else was there to thank for the beauty, the gentleness, the sweet graciousness, the wonder of women. Old fool was he? A poor, blind, bloody fool, sick and mad with uxoriousness. Men were bad enough but women were a dam' sight worst. Wanton light things to whom honour and fidelity had no meaning and faith was but a jesting word. The pitiful liars. And yet once he'd believed something like that. Bad women. Well, perhaps there were.

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There were evil-smelling flowers. But even then weren't flowers and women the loveliest of all earthly things. Well, he'd blurted it all out, confessed it to himself anyhow. Let them grin if they liked. The dead fools. Why should he care? He'd say it again and again if they liked, so they could keep the jest in play. There was nothing in life comparable to the wonder of women. They gave life its only sane meaning. Filled the earth and the sea and sky with beauty and wonder and all loveliness. God! How beautiful Sylvia was! He could not understand how this overwhelming happiness had come to him. A mere fleeting thing, was it? What damnable lies. No day passed but his love and his gratitude did not increase a hundredfold. And so let them lie if they liked, jeer at him for a sentimental fool. What was it they said? Be as glad to sacrifice yourself for the common good as we were glad—— Good God! No! not that. That was Stiles speaking. His thoughts came back to the present with a headlong rush as Stiles sought swiftly in his mind for a fitting sentence to wind up his speech. "It has always been needful," he concluded a little lamely, "that the

individual should suffer for the common good. It now becomes expedient, Brooking, that your happiness be sacrificed for the welfare of mankind.”

As he sat down there was an uneasy silence which was not broken for some moments except by the shifting of feet and the scraping of stools. And then Brooking spoke. He was now master of himself, with all his forces under control and ready to fight. “You want me,” he said quietly, “to agree to the annulment of my marriage and to see another man take my place. Is that it?”

There was a confused murmur of assent.

“No,” he went on loudly. “No! That is my answer, gentlemen.”

“I’m damnably sorry, Brooking,” said Musgrave, “but if you take up that attitude you force us to say that the matter is not one for your decision alone but for the decision of all of us for the common good.”

“Are you all agreed, then?” bitterly. “Are you, Hoople?”

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Hoople nodded. “I’m afraid I don’t see any alternative, Brooking.”

“You, Sheldringham?”

“Yes. What else is there to be done? We have threshed out the whole unfortunate business and can see no other way out of what is an impasse. We agree with everything Stiles has put so ably.”

“And Sheldringham at least, Brooking,” put in Stiles, “can have only disinterested motives, whatever may be thought of us others. As Sylvia’s uncle, he is not of course a possible husband.”

Sheldringham with the utmost difficulty repressed an exclamation of startled anger. He was about to repudiate hotly any such abnegation on his part but a swift glance round at the faces of his companions forced upon him the unpalatable truth that upon that question he was in a minority of one.

“That is exceedingly self-effacing of him,” said Brooking, with a tight grim smile that was not unappreciative of Sheldringham’s ill-concealed dissent. “Are you against me, Seppings? You, Delamere? All right. Don’t bother. I see you are. Well, gentlemen, I refuse. What do you propose to do about it?” He went on hurriedly before anyone could speak, “Do two barren years prove the unfruitfulness of a marriage? That doesn’t require an answer. It is long odds that before another year, two at the outside, my dearest desire, our dearest desire, will be fulfilled.”

“It is a gamble we cannot afford to play, Brooking,” said Musgrave. “It is too hazardous however long the odds in your favour. Surely you must see that. You refuse point-blank and ask us what we propose to do. Frankly, I don’t know.”

“Look here, Brooking,” put in Hoople, “consider this side of it: once this matter becomes an occasion of strife, there’s no putting a limit to where it will end. And that would mean not only that Sylvia would be in great personal danger but that her whole life, every day of it, would become intolerable. Only by settling this wretched business amicably among ourselves can we avoid that. If you stand by your decision and

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fight, for that’s what it means in the last resort, then you begin a struggle that cannot by the very nature of things be confined to ourselves and can only end in the death of some of us and in a vilely horrible position for Sylvia. If no other——”

“One moment,” harshly. “I have no right to refuse. Or rather, that right is shared by another. I am willing to ask Sylvia and abide by her decision. Beyond that I won’t go, and I warn you that I shall meet force with force no matter what the consequences.”

“Very well, Brooking,” said Musgrave quietly, “we accept. Will you ask Sylvia to come here?”

“I don’t think so, Musgrave. I’d rather speak to her myself.”

No one spoke for a moment, and then Delamere said suavely, “I’m against that for one, Brooking. I think Sylvia would prefer to have the whole thing openly said here before us all.”

Brooking turned his grim, bleak face towards Delamere. “You think,” he was beginning harshly, when Sheldringham interrupted, “It may be the truth, Brooking. I don’t know at all. Do any of us? Do you, Brooking? Look here, I’ll go over and put the point to Sylvia, not the whole business, that’s your sole right, but just the small point at issue, and if she’d prefer to come here and have the thing out before us I’ll bring her back. In the other event we’ll leave it to you and wait here until you bring us her decision. Are you agreeable to that?”

“Yes.”

Five minutes later Sheldringham returned with Sylvia. She went over to Brooking and sat down beside him. His glance searched her face. She sat still and expectant, her eyes upon her hands clasped in her lap. “Sylvia,”

said Brooking, his voice taut and rasping, "you will have heard from Sheldringham why we have asked you here. At least you will know something of the reason and perhaps will have guessed much more. Let me put it briefly: Our marriage is considered a failure in one vital aspect and as such it has been put to me that it ought

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to be annulled. Further, that immediately following the annulment you should, in the interests of the community and for the welfare of the human race, take another husband. To these proposals I have been utterly unwilling to assent but I have agreed that the decision should rest with you. That is perhaps an unfair shifting of the responsibility but we had reached an impasse and this seemed the only way out. It is therefore in your hands. Do you wish the marriage annulled?" He avoided looking at her, keeping his eyes fixed on one clenched fist stretched out before him.

"Well, gentlemen," said Sylvia evenly, "you have been rather late in allowing me to share a discussion which affects me more closely than anyone else. I thought we had settled that matter once and for all long ago. I hope it won't happen again. Any question that concerns me, and all questions in this camp concern me at least as closely as they do anyone else, are not to be discussed and settled behind my back. Or attempted to be settled. As for this question you have been discussing you appear to have overlooked the fact that however vitally it may concern you all it cannot touch you as it does me. I will put it more frankly: as the only woman left alive my marriage is of supreme importance and, if at all, is to be discussed only upon my terms. I do not admit your right to discuss it. But for the moment I will waive that. Don't forget that whatever decisions you may come to they are in the last resort entirely dependent upon my wishes for ratification. Bluntly, then, I will not allow any interference with my marriage."

Brooking, a warm tide of happiness and gratitude flooding over him, looked up at her face, but she did not appear to notice his glance and went on slowly, "But I am quite as aware as any of you what my place in the world is, what is hoped of me, expected of me. And this hope, this expectation, have not been fulfilled by my marriage. I am willing, therefore, to put aside whatever personal feelings I may have and to agree to take another husband."

Only Delamere turned his glance to Brooking. The others looked anywhere but where he sat, tense, controlled, looking

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with apparently idle indifference into the palm of his outstretched hand. His hand seemed to belong to another and his glance followed the criss-cross of its lines with an intent concentration. Tags from the jargon of palmistry began to repeat themselves over and over in the blankness of his mind; line of life long and good; line of head deep and strong; line of heart firm and steady; mount of Saturn, mount of Saturn, mount of Saturn—He heard Musgrave's voice, thick and indistinct as if he were speaking from under a blanket, and at first the words did not break into his consciousness as other than inarticulate sounds. And then suddenly they became clear. “. . . Owe you our gratitude. There is no reason at all why there should be any further delay. We have agreed amongst ourselves that to avoid discussion and possible strife we shall cast lots and——”

“You have agreed!” cut in Sylvia coolly. “Well, that is your affair. If it amuses you. For myself, however, I propose to exercise what you seem to have forgotten (among many other things) is a woman's traditional right, the right to choose for herself. I don't know whether you are all merely lacking in a sense of humour. Perhaps that is the kindest way to put it. Otherwise you might have some appreciation of the extraordinary impertinence of your proposal to cast lots to find me a husband. If——”

“It is clear, Sylvia,” interrupted Hoople, “that you have already chosen. But, just for the sake of argument, suppose we don't agree and insist upon a choice by lot.”

“I give you all credit for more sense. You have already agreed, I understand, that the last thing desirable is an open conflict. You will therefore I'm sure see the wisdom of abandoning your proposal or any notion of contesting my choice.”

“And what is your choice, Sylvia?” asked Brooking suddenly.

For the first time since she had entered Sylvia betrayed embarrassment. She hesitated, flushing faintly. The eyes of all the men watched her. The silence began to fret the nerves.

Suddenly there was a devastating interruption. “Sylvia and

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I are being married to-morrow,” drawled Seppings, jumping to his feet, a wide smile on his face. He was apparently self-possessed, but his emotions were still rocking and swaying from the effects of that swift glance of Sylvia’s which had caught and held his own for a revealing second.

“All cut and dried, seemingly,” commented Delamere unpleasantly. “We might have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. You may remove your tongue, Seppings, from where it’s been resting the last twenty-four hours. Or has it been longer?”

“Shut up, Delamere!” rasped Brooking, livid with anger. “Do you know _____”

“Please,” interrupted Sylvia. “Mr. Seppings knew no more about it than anyone else when I came in. In fact all the advantage he had of you was about two seconds. You are not——”

“That’s all right, Sylvia,” smiled Hoople. “You win. Everything open and aboveboard. Do you two mind if I point out that give and take’s not a bad basis for living, and also that the moment is most propitious for a gesture of magnanimity. And for a trifle more frankness. May I continue? Thank you both. I want to suggest that as we withdrew our opposition and thus avoided all difficulties you — both of you, but it’s chiefly Sylvia — will accept a sort of — er — amendment, shall we call it?”

“Go on,” smiled Sylvia, “unless you’re asking us to accept it in advance.”

“No. It’s merely that in the first place you agree to the annulment of your marriage with Seppings at the end of eighteen months if there are then no children. And second, that your next husband shall be chosen by lot.”

Seppings looked into Sylvia’s eyes and she smiled back at him. She turned her glance towards Hoople, the smile still on her lips. “We accept the — er — amendment, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER VI

THE RIGHTS OF MAN

DURING these three years Sid had slowly drifted down into the position of a general maid-of-all-work both in the cook-house and about the camp. His initial handicap had proved too strong for him and after one desperate attempt to assert himself he abandoned the effort and accepted both his humble office and the faintly patronising indifference with which the others regarded him. These handicaps had been great. Combined with his own shy abashed sensitiveness (the fruit of his heredity and his environment in boyhood and adolescence) there had been others, quite fortuitous but equally unfortunate: he had joined Q.I. only a day or two before the trip began and found a crew already on fairly familiar terms from nearly a month's association; he was ten years younger than any of the other male survivors; and, perhaps most unfortunate of all, his first few days aboard Q.I. had several times, owing to his incompetence, brought him into conflict with his superiors, so that with his relegation to the cook's galley by the chief engine-room artificer he found himself marked down as a dud. It was not even the sort of dud who, made a butt of at first, may in the end by good temper and attempted repartee win himself a place of mild affection among his mates; he was the complete dud who is at times ignored and at others shoved impatiently aside.

And so about him during these three years there was gradually built up a barrier that shut him off from the life of his fellows and drove him deeper and deeper into the quagmire of self-pity and the delusive mists of introspection and make-believe.

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There were several attempts to break down that growing barrier both from inside and without. Unluckily, his own attempt came first and with its failure the others were fore-doomed. It was at one of those periods when he was being shoved impatiently aside rather than ignored. He was being clumsily unfortunate in those minor tasks allotted to him, smashing and upsetting, letting out the fires, spilling food, spoiling the tea, burning or scalding himself and others, and a dozen other similar mishaps, each of which increased both the exasperation of the men and his own

maladroitness. The rough, half-humorous and wholly blasphemous vituperation heaped upon him began at last to stir him to rebellion and during a long hour of brooding unhappiness, as he lay awake during the night, he remembered with a throb of hope the one berserk fight of his boyhood when, in ninety thrilling seconds, he had smashed his way to overwhelming victory. If, with that heady recollection, the thought also came to him that the result of that victory had been nil he pushed it back into the depths of his consciousness. Here was something he had done of which he might be proud, something of the sort of fine, foolhardy, successful thing that came so easily to others. Why not repeat it? Could he? Was that mad, blind, reckless mood a thing that could be recaptured, invoked at will? Well, he would see. For once anyhow he would not fail for want of determination. And afire and glowing with this decision he fell asleep.

But when the moment came, all the cards were marked and he went down not into the honourable valley of defeat but into the abyss of ridicule.

Nobby Clark, Jones, Priestly, Levinsky and Ferguson were lounging about near the cook-house during a spell when Sid passed carrying an empty dixie.

“Hey, Slushy,” sang out Clark, “chuck us a match.”

“I haven’t one.”

“Well, go and get a box.”

“Right-o. Soon as I’ve filled this dixie.”

“Dixie, be——! Hop off and get it now.” And as Sid was

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within reach he turned him round with a grin and putting a toe to his rear urged him not too gently in the required direction.

This was the moment. Sid dropped the dixie and turning round swiftly landed a quite respectable blow on Clark’s jaw. There was a shout of laughter in which Clark joined. Nobby Clark had been born in Whitechapel and from fourteen until he joined the Navy at nineteen had fought some scores of fights (four or six-round preliminaries) at Wonderland. Boozing had prevented him rising out of the preliminary class but he had all the tricks of the trade at his finger tips and knew every side of the game, bright and shady. Now, toughened by simple fare, hard work and forced abstinence he would have been an opponent whom either Jones or

Levinsky (both at one time champions at their weight) might have hesitated to tackle.

It was not then a fight, not even a thrashing, but that unbearable indignity, a slapping, and one that was accompanied by the laughter not only of the onlookers but of the administrator. As Sid rushed in again, a chill feeling in his belly as he realised that the berserk rage and its amazing powers had failed to appear, Clark swayed his body to one side, jerked his head and, grinning widely, with his open palm struck Sid on the cheek. At each successive rush, growing more and more blind, these slaps were repeated, Clark showing a wise judgment in choosing spots hitherto unslapped. Sid grew beside himself with shamed fury. But worse was to follow. Rushing in again he tripped, stumbled and fell on his face. Clark stooped swiftly, dragged him upwards, wedged his head tightly between his own knees and roughly pushing down his trousers, gave him a dozen stinging smacks with the palm of one hard, calloused hand. And then with a laugh he dropped him and said jovially, as Sid stood up and began to pull up his trousers, “Now run for those matches, Slushy, and put a jerk in it.”

For a brief moment Sid hesitated. A rebel voice that he had not heard for years shouted within him, “Don’t go, you little

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fool. Slip into him again if he kills you.” If he had listened — but he didn’t listen. He shut his ears to that warm, inspiring, intoxicating counsel and, hitching his belt tight and lowering his wet eyes before the grins of the men, he shambled over to the stores and brought the box.

That sorry incident topped with barbed wire the barricades already erected, so that when Hoople came to them they were insurmountable and he could only peer over and sing out a friendly salutation, which was apparently ignored. Delamere’s endeavour to establish communication with the solitary behind the barrier was in a different category and would have failed in any case.

It was in the late spring of Year Three that Sid, out on a lonely ramble, ran into Delamere.

“Off for a quiet walk?” with affable fatuity.

“Yes, sir.”

“No need to call me sir, Larkins,” turning and falling into step beside Sid, “all brothers in — er — affliction, y’know. Splendid to see grass and

flowers again,” gesturing towards the sparse patches of green, white and yellow, “don’t you think?”

“Yes, si — yes.” Was this fat giant of a creature with his great splay hands and feet and sort of nasty smile going to spoil his walk and muck up his dreams with his smarmy voice.

“How’re you finding life? A bit slow?”

“It’s all right.”

“Not much like London.”

“I only been to London once. Six days it was. On my way down to Southampton.”

“Not much time for fun then, eh? What did you do with yourself?”

“Just walked about. Went to the pictures.”

“Ah! not alone, I’ll wager.”

“I was. Didn’t know anybody in London.”

“That doesn’t usually prevent a smart-looking lad finding company.

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What did he mean by that? A smart-looking lad. Trying to be funny. Laughing at him. A frown wrinkled the low wide forehead under the straw-coloured hair. Better mind what he was up to, the big fat toad. “Well, *I* didn’t, anyhow,” half-truculently, half-defensively.

“Too much common sense. Pity more young fellows in London haven’t some of it. Often come out walking alone?” putting an arm about Sid’s shoulders.

“Mostly I do,” with an effort preventing himself from shrinking away.

“Not too good for you, you know, Larkins. Man is a gregarious animal — made for company and good fellowship and all that sort of thing.”

“I come out for a bit of a think,” wondering if he could muster up sufficient courage to be rude to this shambling intruder upon his dreams. He sought for something witty and telling, and not too impudent, but abandoned the effort as beyond him.

“*Il penseroso*, eh? The thoughtful man. The contemplative man. Quite monkish, Larkins.”

Monkish? What did he mean? Like a monkey? But that was monkeyish. Or was it? Monkish, he said. Like a monk. What did he mean by that? He must be a damned old fool.

“Jolly old boys they were, Larkins,” drawing closer, his arm tightening its hold. “High old times they used to have. Showed their good sense.

Plenty of good grub and a bottle or two and other things when the blinds were drawn and the shutters up, eh, Larkins, the gay dogs! And why not? None the worse for it. All the better if you ask me. Nothing's so bad for a fellow as going without all the things he's meant to have, all the things nature meant him to have. And nothing's so good for him as to have them. In moderation, of course. Just a little when the fancy takes him."

"A little of what y' fancy does y' good," out of his depth, but remembering a song Scotty was always singing lugubriously.

"That's the word, Larkins. But you don't remember dear

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old Marie, surely? No. I thought not. But she hit the nail on the head every time. Absolutely right, Larkins——"

"Here!" hotly. "What're you doing?" a dozen veiled hints and half-understood phrases that he had overheard from some of the men during the last few months suddenly invading his memory. "You drop that, see?" his tone rising hysterically in disgusted dismay.

"No need to get excited, Larkins," patronisingly. "You misunderstand me. Now as you were saying——"

"I wasn't saying nothing. I don't want to talk to you. You leave me alone." With an abrupt realisation of his position of advantage, "Go on, hop it! You old snot. See? Hop it!"

Delamere went with a contemptuous shrug that tempted Sid to stop and hurl a piece of rock at him. But characteristically he refrained from that outward expression of his violated feelings and, muttering rarely-used obscenities, his face hot from the encounter, he resumed his lonely walk and had soon forgotten the disturbing experience in the enervating delights of the land of fancy.

Hoople's friendly attempt to climb the barricade rather unluckily came while the Delamere affair was still unpleasantly fresh in Sid's memory. The partial success he achieved was by no means due to any help received from the self-centred, unhappy and self-pitying entity pacing behind gloomy barriers, the tiny periphery of its own limitations.

Sid was, in his own words, having two draws and a spit before turning in for the night. He was leaning against a boulder a few hundred yards from the camp when Hoople passed, his briar pipe blasting away in great contentment.

Hoople paused with a touch of irresolution. "Hello, Larkins!" he said, perhaps a shade too heartily. "Enjoying a quiet smoke?"

Sid was on the defensive at once. "Seems like it."

"Tiring day it's been," moving nearer and wedging his back into a groin of the boulder at half-right angles to Sid, at which the latter's defensiveness moved a hair's breadth

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towards something more active. "But then," went on Hoople, completely unconscious of the emotional turmoil bubbling and frothing so close to him, "all these hot days are tiring, don't you think? Impossible at my age to get used to these semi-tropical summers. More adaptable at your age, I expect."

Rather uncertain of the precise meaning of all this, Sid contented himself with a faint non-committal noise.

"I often," continued Hoople, allowing a cloud of smoke to seep out slowly from his mouth, "look back with longing to the frost and snow and cold northeasters of England. And, you know, I hated them at the time, and if I went back should hate them again. Queer that, isn't it? Ever feel like that?"

"I'don'know. Never thought about it." What *was* his little game? Anyhow, if *he* came any capers he'd better look out. Wasn't much of *him*. Proper Tich he was. A slosh on his big snout was what he'd get in half a minute. One thing, it couldn't spoil his looks. Ugly, black-faced little rat. Rat was right with his squeaky voice. Or more like an old duck turning in his toes and waddling.

"By the way, now I come to think of it, I don't believe you've ever been after one of my books. Don't you do any reading?"

"Haven't no time."

"Haven't much, that's true. But I always find when I get hold of a good yarn I just *make* time and let everything else go hang. Ever read *Alice in Wonderland*? I've got that, you know."

Trying to be funny now, was he. "What do you take me for?" truculently, "a blinkin' schoolgirl. I haven't, see? Got me?"

"Well," slightly puzzled, "you're about the only one in camp who hasn't. Why, d'you know, Musgrave would sleep with it under his pillow every night if we'd let him."

"Oh?"

“But perhaps you don’t care for fantasy. Like stronger stuff. So do I, for that matter. Care about history?”

What next? What was the silly old fool getting at? Bit

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simple, p’raps. Sid stole a swift look at Hoople’s reassuring little figure. P’raps he *was* all right, barring a bit of softness. And not all soft anyhow. The other nobs (blast them! Why should they be nobs? Kidding themselves they was God Amighties) seemed to treat him as if he knew a thing or two. He stole another quick look at Hoople. Ugly mug he had got and no blinkin’ error. Ugly. Gawd! Yers, not half, but somehow it wasn’t sort of, well, not like that fat-chopped smarmy Delamere, old bastard.

Hoople’s voice broke in on his drifting thoughts. “Now I’ve got a book I’m sure you’d like. Good solid stuff to bite on. Last you for months. I’ve read it a dozen times. Been my Bible, I’m afraid. Ever read any sea voyages?”

P’raps he was only just a bit of an old fool but all right. “I have a bit,” his truculence beginning to evaporate. Bit queer he should hit on just the stuff he *did* like reading. “’Bout Captain Cook. And another ’bout ’Aw — Hawkins and Frobisher.”

“Fine. They were the times, eh? *and* the men. Well, now, I’ve got a book that’ll keep you busy and happy for months. Called *Moby Dick*. I’ll bring it along at breakfast to-morrow. Well, good-night. Glad you like the same sort of stuff as I do. When you’ve finished *Moby Dick* drop into the library and prowl round till you find something else you like. And, as they used to say in the shops, if you don’t see what you want, ask for it. Another scorcher to-morrow, I’m afraid. Good-night.”

Sid watched the slightly stooping little figure grow faint in the gathering darkness, a cloud of smoke trailing behind it. “Seems all right,” he muttered, trying gingerly to extract a last draw from his cigarette without burning his lips. “But you never know.”

The upshot of the meeting was that during the next eighteen months or so Sid read with varying interest such oddly assorted volumes as *Moby Dick*, *A Short History of the World*, *The City of Dreadful Night*, *The Adventures of A Younger Son*, *Pepys’ Diary* and *The Martyrdom of Man*.

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Somehow he seemed to find behind the rather superficial and easy iconoclastics of Winwood Reade's masterpiece the mind of a kindred spirit. He read it through several times and when at last he returned it, Hoople, with an amused appreciation of its thumbled and dog's-eared leaves, told him to keep it. "We're the only two, I believe," he added with a comical grin, "who've got beyond the first two chapters, so it won't be missed. And if I want to read it again I'll know where it is."

But beyond this point Hoople made no further progress behind Sid's barriers.

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The marriage of Seppings and Sylvia was unfertile and at the end of the eighteen months the problem had again to be faced. The period had not passed without disturbing signs of unrest; portents were not lacking of a growing spirit of discontent and insubordination among the men and on several occasions orders had had to be enforced by a threat of shooting; Seppings once having, in fact, drawn his pistol and given Levinsky five seconds to obey. The Jew had sullenly caved in a fraction of a second before Seppings's finger tightened on the trigger.

But more and more towards the end of the eighteen months the malcontents among the men (and these included all except Flagg, Priestly, Fish, Archer and Sid) met together by chance or design to discuss their grievances, imaginary and actual, and one meeting in particular, called by Levinsky, definitely marked the break-up of camp discipline and foreshadowed the fast approaching hour when the demands of the men for their rights was to pass into violent action. It was significant that the meeting had been called together during the working hours of the morning and the men's sudden cessation of work at ten o'clock might well have precipitated the now inevitable trouble had not Flagg, who was in charge of a working-party that included Levinsky, Jones, Ferguson and Clark, merely shrugged his shoulders when they dropped their tools and strolled away towards Levinsky's

hut. There they were presently joined by Scott, Dixon and Wells. Levinsky came to the point without any waste of time. There was in fact no need of

an explanatory exordium; there had been, all felt, more than enough of talk during the last two years.

“By the end of the week Seppy’s time’s up,” began Levinsky. “Now what are we going to do about it?”

“What’re we going to do about a lot of things, Jewy boy?” said Clark. “That’s what I’d like to know.”

“One thing at a time. Seppy’s had his innings and missed the blinkin’ bull’s-eye. So another man gets the gun. Point is who?”

“Just half-a-trick,” put in Ferguson quietly; “let’s get one thing plain. If we’re going to have a shot for that gun there’s another gun we’re up against, don’t forget that. Two guns I should ’a’ said — the Old Man’s and Seppy’s. You can all bet your shirts the gents don’t mean to let us have a look-in with Sylvia; it’s a raffle this time, according to Flaggy, but we don’t get tickets. If we want ’em we’ve got to take ’em and that means a scrap. The Old Man’s more than ready just now to shoot just to keep up discipline and don’t need much encouragement. He’d sooner shoot the lot of us than see her married to one of us.”

“Not so sure about that, Shiner,” said Wells. “Don’t forget he’s had his turn and won’t get another. Why should he care who has her?”

“That shows what a fat lot you know about it,” grinned Ferguson. “Both him and Seppy, as you say, ’ve had their little go and missed fire. They’ll hate it like hell handing her over to one of the others but they’ll do it, eyes front, chin up, hand on sword, and all that when it’s one of their own crush that’s getting her. But a rating have her! Cripes! Digger, have a heart, boy. Discipperline, tradishuns of the service and all that, old son; to say nothing of the old school and the blinkin’ ’varsity and that sort of nuts. Why, bless your heart——”

“Half a minute, Shiner,” interrupted Jones, “Don’t forget the Old Man was a rating and got his commission for blood

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and guts on *Broke* during the War. So when you get down to facts he’s one of us in a way of speaking.”

“One of us in a way of——!” mocked Ferguson. “You born yesterday, Digger? That’s the sort that’s a dam’ sight worse than the others. Always has been. You were on *Drake* in ’26, weren’t you? Remember old Spit-and-Polish? Well, he came out of a blinkin’ board school in the Mile End Road. And he’d ’a’ given God Almighty cells if he hadn’t got his halo polished.

Talk sense, old man. Look at Mussy. First Lord of the Admiralty. And he came out of the gutter and went to a board school. All in the papers years ago. He shown any signs of siding with us? I ask you! Have a bit of nous. There's only one thing we've got to talk about and that is are we going to fight for the lass? I don't mind a scrap, although if we're goin' to have a fight I'd sooner it was for the key of the booze store *personally*. However, I'll go with the crowd and you can count me in straight away."

"That's all O.K., Shiner boy," grinned Levinsky. "We'll have the booze as well. Don't believe in half measures m'self. And the automatics too."

"Pinch 'em sure, if we can," agreed Ferguson, "and then take the little 'bus and chuck 'em into the sea. There'll never be any peace in this joint while there's a cartridge left. And don't forget we've got to settle down after the scrap and live in peace and quiet with the others."

"If any!" chuckled Scott. "Not a bad idee if we wiped out the nobs and made a fresh start."

"And it wouldn't be long," commented Ferguson, "before the bloke with the automatic'd want to do a bit more wipin' out. What about you, Jewy? Suppose you marry Sylvia and haven't rung the bell at the end of a twelvemonth. And suppose you've the only automatic. Would you hand the goods over to me with your blessing? I *don't* think!"

"Well, you have another don't think, Shiner," said Levinsky, flushing. "Fair's fair and I've never double-crossed anyone nor done 'em a thick 'un. Share and share alike. If I couldn't ring the bell I'd make way for a better man."

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"That's the stuff, old son!" smiled Ferguson affably. "But I'd sooner see the automatics chucked in the sea for all that," he added, with a wink at Jones.

"Point is," snapped Levinsky, "are we going to fight? Those in favour? O.K., then. Anyone got——"

"'Alf a mo'," said Clark. "This 'ere bleedin' raffle. We're all cock sure we're out of it, but are we? I'm for a fight. Always have been. Had over ninety contests at Wonderland afore I was sixteen. And ready for the gong every time, I was. Fiver for a K.O. win, three quid for points and a quid for a lose. But if I could have got that fiver *or* the three quid *without going into the ring* I'd have had it every time. Got me? Well, that's what I mean. My advice is wait and see. If they're going to give us a square deal that's all we

want. No 'casion to start a fight if we can get what we want without it. Horse sense that is."

"What a hope you've got, Nobby!" grinned Ferguson. "Still, what you say 's right enough. *If*, and a bloody big *if* it is, *if* they're going to give us a square deal this time, why the fight's off as far as I'm concerned."

"What about the booze?" asked Scott, almost querulously.

"Booze my backside!" replied Levinsky. "Don't mind risking my neck but booze ain't one of the things I'll do it for. And anyway once we get the other business on the square we'll stand a better chance of fixing things ship-shape all round. And then if you want a drop o' good stuff regularly, Scotty, old son, you'll get it. Only don't forget when *this* boozer closes down it's shut for keeps."

"Soon settle that," put in Dixon. "We'll take over the doings, count the bottles and share 'em all out fair and square. An' anyone who likes to drink himself blind why that's his business."

"All right, any way you like," said Levinsky impatiently. "Booze cuts no ice with me——"

"What about Nobby's blinking amendment?" interrupted Ferguson.

"'Alf a minute! 'Alf a minute! Give us a chance. I put it to

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the meeting. You heard what Nobby said. Those in favour? O.K. again. On'y point left is how're we going to find out. Come on, Shiner," sarcastically. "Spit it out."

"Easy. The gents are bound to have a meeting for their raffle. All right. We wait to sec if we're asked. If we are we go. If we're not," pausing and then adding with a broad grin, "we go all the same."

"Break in?"

"That's the ticket. I vote we leave it at that. And I'll toss you, Jonah, who hops along to the cook-house and gets Slushy to bring us along a dixie of tea." He flicked a cigarette picture into the air.

"Picture," said Jones.

"Butter-side *down*!" laughed Ferguson. "Buzz off, Jonah, old son, and no swipes. Put in two for the pot."

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Three evenings later the same seven men gathered outside the door of Seppings's hut. They stood hesitating for some moments and then Levinsky put his hand on the latch. He had clearly expected to find it bolted, for the sudden push he gave carried him well into the room as the door flew open. His companions crowded in on his heels and the seven stood together in a close group as if instinctively retaining physical touch to keep up their confidence.

Seppings was sitting in the big wooden arm-chair that had been one of Flagg's earliest efforts at furniture-making. On his right sat Brooking; Sheldringham and Hoople occupied a small rough bench; Musgrave and Stiles were on stools and Delamere sat on the floor with his back against the wall.

"What d'you want, Ferguson?" asked Brooking sharply.

"We've come here," began Levinsky, when Brooking cut in, "I asked Ferguson. Hold your tongue."

"None o' that!" Levinsky was beginning threateningly, when Ferguson put a hand on his arm. "Don't be a fool, Jewy," he whispered. "Leave it to me for a minute. You can have a go presently."

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"Well, Ferguson, what the devil do you mean by coming here like this?"

"We've come for a bit of information, sir."

"Chief Petty Officer Flagg's the person to see if you're seeking information. And if it's a fit and proper matter he'll bring you either to me or to Mr. Seppings. And we're busy just now. About turn."

No one moved and for a long minute there was silence.

"Sit down, mates," said Ferguson with sudden loudness. "That's right. Make yourselves comfortable." He remained standing and, turning again towards Brooking, went on firmly but courteously, "It's no use talking like that, sir. We're through with that."

"You're what?" incredulously.

"Finished with that sort of thing. We want a squarer deal than we've had in the past and that's flat."

"Don't talk like a dam' fool, Ferguson; you've had a square deal all along, all of you. It's been share and share alike."

"Not altogether, sir."

"Indeed. Well, let's hear in what way——"

“Stow it! Shiner, give him the straight griffin,” Levinsky burst in angrily, but was silenced by shouts of, “Shut up, Jewy! Wait a bit. Go on, Shiner.”

“I reckon you know what we’re driving at, sir.”

“You’re mistaken.”

“All right, sir. If you don’t know it’s time you did. This here meeting of you gents is to choose another husband for Mrs. Seppings.”

“That doesn’t concern you.”

“Well, it does, sir. That’s the point. We understand that it’s a raf — a sort of lot business and as fellow members of the camp and fellow men with you all we claim, we all claim, the right to share in the raf — the dr — the lot.”

“*All* claim, do you? Where are the others?”

“They’re in the rec. room, sir. Wouldn’t come along, but they’re with us all the same.”

“Well, we shall see. I propose,” turning to look at the small

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party about him, “to send for them. Anyone not agreeable? What about you, Seppings?”

“Go ahead, sir,” very quietly.

“Scott, go and tell Flagg to come along and bring Fish, Priestly, Archer and Larkins.”

Scott returned quickly with Flagg and three others.

Flagg, flushing, saluted and said uneasily, “All present, sir, except Larkins. He’s not in camp.”

“He didn’t know nothing about it,” prompted Archer hoarsely.

“All right. Never mind about him. Flagg, I want to ask you a few questions. The others may sit down. They may smoke.”

“Thanks for nothing,” muttered Jones, who had a lighted cigarette in his cupped fist.

“Now, then, Flagg, a deputation of the men, entirely unauthorised and therefore completely out of court, but we’ll let that pass for the moment; this deputation, then, has waited upon me here and stated that all of you are aggrieved because you’re not getting a square deal. Is that correct?”

“Well, sir, in a way,” shifting his feet. “You see——”

“I see, Flagg. I’ve heard their version of the grievance. Perhaps you’ll state it.”

“Well, sir, they think, we think, that the time’s come when we ought to be on equal footing in everything.” He hesitated, plainly at a loss how to put the matter as inoffensively as possible. Now it came to putting it into words he realised what thundering insolence it would sound to the Old Man and further that it was about the awkwardest job he’d ever had to face. But feeling that if he hesitated any longer he’d back out of it altogether, he ceased to hunt for phrases and blurted out incontinently, “It’s like this, sir, we reckon we ought to be in this lot business. We’re all men and there’s only one woman among us, asking your pardon, Mr. Seppings, and it’s only right and fair we should stand a chance of having — of getting a — of being her husband. Sorry to be putting it so rough and ready, gentlemen, but it’s not the sort of thing a man reckons to come across and so——”

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“That’s enough, Flagg. You may sit down. Well now, gentlemen, you’ve heard what’s been said. Does anyone wish to make any observations? We’ll have all the cards on the table and settle the matter once for all. Let’s have no reservations.”

“I suggest,” said Delamere suavely, “that the — er — deputation retire while we discuss it.”

A glance at the men’s faces made it so obvious that this request would be refused that Brooking merely said, “I don’t think you’ll carry the meeting, Delamere, so we’ll pass on.”

“I fancy the time’s come,” said Hoople quietly, “when we must accept the inevitable.”

“I think so, too,” agreed Sheldringham.

“I’m against it,” said Musgrave firmly. “For a dozen reasons.”

“I’m with you, Musgrave,” said Stiles, and Delamere nodded over to them with a faint grin: “Count me in with you.”

“If you men were not in the service,” said Brooking bluntly, “I’d be willing to accept your point of view, but as it is I must, quite regretfully I assure you, refuse the request.” A resentful and menacing clamour was beginning when he raised his hand. “That is to say merely that I vote against it. It will be put to the meeting presently. Well, Seppings?”

“Leave me out, sir,” in a strained voice, scarcely above a whisper.

“D’you mean, Brooking,” asked Musgrave, “that you’re putting the question to the meeting?”

“Yes,” harshly.

“Why bother? The result’s obvious.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help that. The principle of share and share alike without any reservations whatever is now, it seems, in control. I therefore put the question to the meeting. Those in favour?” Looking round and slowly counting the upraised hands, “Thirteen; thank you. Those against? One, two, three, and myself four. Mr. Seppings not voting. The request of the deputation, gentlemen, is therefore granted.”

“No!” said Seppings quietly.

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The buzz of excited talk that had already begun was stilled to a tense expectant silence by that blunt negative.

Levinsky jumped to his feet. “Too late, Seppy,” he sneered insolently. “It’s been carried and you can——”

“Sit down!” sharply but still quietly.

Levinsky, cowed for a moment, dropped to the ground.

“No!” repeated Seppings. “I refuse to allow it. I refuse as an officer and I refuse as Sylvia’s husband. That’s all. Flagg, the deputation is dismissed.”

Levinsky sprang again to his feet followed by Jones. “Dismissed, be ——!” he roared. “We’re stopping and what’s more, you——”

“Sit down!”

“Sit down, be ——!” standing his ground truculently.

Seppings drew out his automatic. “I give you five seconds to sit down, Levinsky,” he said slowly. “One — two — three — four — five.” The smashing noise of the explosion in the confined space and Levinsky’s scream sounded simultaneously. The Jew pitched forward and lay still and while every eye in startled dismay watched the prone figure, Evan Jones, with an oath, hurled himself on Seppings, ducked as Seppings fired again and crumpled into a twisting writhing heap at the foot of Musgrave’s chair. He suddenly lifted his head, glared indomitably at Seppings, tried to speak, vomited a stream of crimson blood and was dead.

Seppings stood up, the automatic levelled. “You’ve heard what I said. Your request is refused. Deputation ’shun.” The men obeyed sullenly. “Flagg, the deputation is dismissed.” Flagg saluted. “Party, quick-march!” he roared and fell into step behind.

“And now,” said Seppings slowly, “we’ll resume where we left off. You have the cards ready, Sheldringham? Go ahead then. The Queen of Hearts.”

Sheldringham slowly began to deal a card each to Musgrave, Hoople, Stiles and Delamere and at the seventh round the Queen of Hearts fell upon Stiles's heap. The Bishop sat staring at the gift from heaven, his face flushed, his eyes bright, his

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whole body trembling. He felt suddenly unable to cope with the situation, utterly at a loss for words. "Well — er — gentlemen," he stammered at last, "I trust I shall — I hope that God's blessing may fall upon my marriage."

"When's it to be?" asked Delamere with an unpleasant grin. "Perform the ceremony yourself, won't you?"

"I fear——"

"Not at all," put in Brooking. "It is within my authority. I shall be glad to oblige, Stiles. When do you wish it?"

"Er — to-morrow, I think, if you — er — Seppings — doesn't——"

"Go ahead, Stiles."

"Thank you. Then to-morrow, gentlemen," exhaling loudly and mopping the beads of sweat from his face.

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CHAPTER VII

PARDONABLE COMPLACENCY OF DR. STILES

THE marriage was, however, postponed for twenty-four hours to allow for the burial of the bodies of Levinsky and Jones. The wedding-breakfast was the dismalest of regales; there were too many skeletons present. The men were sullen and quiet; Seppings, obviously unhappy, was also suffering from the mental after-effects of his fatal enforcement of discipline; Sylvia plainly shared in some degree Sepping's unhappiness; Stiles, a prey to intense emotion, fretted everyone's nerves with an intermittent boisterousness; Musgrave and Sheldringham were gloomy and distracted; only Delamere, Brooking and Hoople seemed their usual selves, while Sid, insignificant as always, shambled with laden dishes from table to table, his eyes on the ground and himself the only unwatched and unregarded member of the gathering.

Towards the end of his eighteen months Seppings had gradually assumed a sort of leadership, or rather chieftainship, which, while not in any way encroaching upon Brooking's province as Commander, wore more than a slight resemblance to monarchial rank. For the first time it began to be apparent that the husband of Sylvia (already in many ways the unquestioned queen of the community with many of a queen's rights and a queen's limitations) would be for his term of office in the tactically advantageous position of Queen's Consort and to some extent the power behind the throne. This consideration was undoubtedly uppermost in Stiles's mind when an hour or two before the wedding he approached Seppings and suggested that it would be only in accordance with

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the rights of his new rank and position if he were allowed to have possession of one of the automatics.

"One of them?" said Seppings bluntly. "I've only one."

"I — er — understood you had three."

"That's right. I *had* three. But I returned two to Brooking over three years ago. At his request, I may say. Or order would be the true word. I also returned with it all my ammunition, except the eight cartridges in the

magazine.” Grimly, “Reduced now to six. You had better make your request to Brooking.”

“Impossible, Stiles, I’m afraid,” replied Brooking a few minutes later. “It’s quite true, as Seppings has told you, that I requested him to return to store two of his automatics with ammunition. They remained there with my two spare ones for some months and then I came to the considered conclusion that they were far too dangerous to be kept anywhere but on my person. That being obviously impossible, I took the opportunity, upon one of our exploring expeditions, to dump four of them and most of the ammunition into the sea. My own and Seppings’s weapon are the only two now in existence. He has only the ammunition in his magazine and I myself have a similar quantity plus one box of a thousand that is safely hidden several miles from the camp. I’m afraid your kingship, for that’s what apparently it’s beginning to be considered, will have to rest upon stronger foundations than physical force.” With a dry smile: “Moral suasion and Christian charity.”

The shooting of Levinsky and Jones had more far-reaching effects than the immediate one of cowing the men into obedience. It had smashed, and for a while it seemed irrevocably, the atmosphere of good fellowship and comradeship which had been a slow but steady growth of the years, a growth which had had to struggle against environing conditions (of the foreseen future no less than of the past and present) which would have killed a less sturdy and less deeply and firmly-rooted plant. If that smashing had merely restored the old rigid discipline with all its drawbacks and in all its invidiousness,

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it might have had considerable advantages — the supposition was at least an arguable one. But there was no arguing about the cold, unpleasant fact that the community was now no longer one of fellowship and good will but had become a camp of two bitterly opposed and hostile factions. Nor did it help matters at all that one of the factions was unarmed and so comparatively helpless and therefore subject and obedient. It was a silent, sullen and aloof obedience that was more disturbing than defiance and it was menacing because it fore-shadowed not open rebellion but hidden, smouldering hate.

The two months that followed the new marriage were for everyone (with the exception of Stiles) incomparably the most unhappy and troubled

period since the world disaster. There seemed no sign or hope of improvement. The new heaven and new earth that had been planned seemed plainly marked out for failure and destruction at no very distant date. And then, when the position was fast becoming so unbearable that an outbreak of violence would have been welcomed by both parties, the news went like wild-fire round the camp that Sylvia was pregnant. And with this promise of new life that seemed in itself a miracle another miracle no less wonderful followed: with the sudden swiftness of a sunbreak through cloud and with the same happy, heartening effect the intolerable fog of hostility lifted, leaving behind but faint wisps and traces of its late presence and these were presently blown away on the wind of general rejoicing. There followed, perhaps as a logical revulsion of feeling, a closer *rapprochement* between the two parties than had hitherto been achieved. It needed but one step further in that coming together to have made a permanent foundation of good will and co-operation; but that final step was not taken.

Nevertheless, there was a re-establishment of harmony and comparative good-fellowship, the first fruits of which was a quite ludicrous outbreak of what can only be termed pre-natal fussiness as regards Sylvia. She was followed by anxious glances, dogged by ministering footsteps and proffering hands to an extent that began most tryingly to interfere with her

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liberty and her desire for at least occasional privacy. She could not set off for an evening stroll without feeling certain that one or two of the men had been told off to see that no harm befell her and that one or two others had gratuitously taken that honourable office upon themselves. If she went to lift any object above a few pounds in weight eager and apologetic hands snatched it up for her. If she stretched up to a shelf a dozen cries of alarm and protest rang out and two dozen self-abasing feet sped to her assistance.

All manner of articles were contrived for her protection or greater comfort — sunshades, umbrellas, wraps, mantles and overshoes. The stores were ransacked to make nourishing meals for her and if she stood still for a second someone would steal up with a chair, while another hurried away to make her a cup of tea.

At first she found it amusing, even faintly gratifying, but these pleasant feelings were soon displaced by a growing exasperation that threatened an explosion. It was perhaps only fit and proper that the explosion when it came should crash about the head of Stiles. It was early one warm October

morning about the end of her third month of gestation when Stiles, looking sideways from his lathered reflection in his shaving-mirror, saw her making towards the door with a towel over her arm.

“You’re not going bathing, my dear, are you?” he asked fatuously, his razor quivering dangerously.

“Of course I am. Haven’t I been every morning for the last six months.”

“Certainly you have, my dear Sylvia; but don’t you think it’s time you gave it up?”

“Nonsense. It’s warm enough till December.”

“I’m not thinking of the temperature, but of your condition. I’m sure ——” Sylvia turned on him so swiftly that he stopped abruptly, his mouth remaining open, his whole face expressing, as well as it was able under its lather, the most grotesque alarm. “What — what is it, my dear?”

Sylvia dropped the towel on to a stool and sat down upon

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her bed. “Now look here, Raymond,” she said bluntly, “all this simply footling nonsense must stop.”

“What nonsense, my dear?”

“All of it. And don’t interrupt. Finish your shaving and listen. I’m sick to death of the way I’m followed and worried and harassed by all of you. It’s got to stop. I’m perfectly serious, desperately serious. I don’t find it amusing or agreeable or gratifying. It’s just damnably infuriating and I’m quite certain if it goes on I’ll not answer for the consequences either to myself, the child or — or the others. I refuse to be interfered with in any way. I know what is best for me and I won’t be fussed over by a parcel of silly old men and still sillier young ones. This concerns you more intimately than the others but they are also included in the ban——”

“The *ban*! My dear,” in an amazed whisper.

“Yes, ban. I can’t think of a better word at the moment but it’ll serve. You can interpret it any way you like, so long as you observe its implications, you *and* the others.”

“But, my dear, what *are* its——”

“Don’t be so dense. It’s clear enough surely. I intend to please myself in every way and I refuse to allow any interference with my full liberty of action. Don’t look so frantically stupid. If you and the rest of the camp don’t forget, or at least act as if they’d forgotten, that I’m going to have a baby in six months’ time I’ll clear out and leave you if it means that I’ve to

live alone for the rest of my days. I'm perfectly serious. Now you can translate that ultimatum to the camp in any words you like. As long as my demands are observed I don't care a rap what mumbo-jumbo you invent for the purpose but it must be efficacious." She jumped off the bed and, picking up her towel, moved over to the door. Stiles sat down and searched hurriedly for a cigarette as the door closed behind her. He had lit a match when she pushed open the door again and putting in her head said sharply, "And I don't want to see a vast plate of nourishing food planked down in front of me when I come back. A cup of tea will probably be quite sufficient." The door shut with a clang. The match burned Stiles's fingers

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and he found a rare relief by a stream of whispered profanity that was well above the general level of the camp's verbal explosions.

Sylvia's commands were obeyed in letter if not so completely in spirit, but whatever watching and warding was done was managed so unobtrusively as to be unnoticeable, except by a more captious eye than Sylvia's.

If to the community the most important effect of the babe's coming had been the partial reconciliation of the two factions it had had greater effects in the person of Stiles. His marriage with Sylvia had brought him in fullest measure a happiness and supreme physical content hitherto unknown, hitherto, indeed, believed unachievable. It had struck the first blows at the bogey that had haunted him since his adolescence had passed into manhood, that bogey of invirility that at times seemed to wear the guise of impotence. The bogey had winced before those first blows but held its ground. But the promise of fatherhood struck it a mortal blow and having buried his life-long enemy, Stiles prepared to enjoy his triumph. A new tone of assurance crept into the deep boom of his voice, an all unconscious touch of arrogance into his bearing. He was a man; more, he was a better man (so his happy thoughts went) than that hard-bitten fellow Brooking, a finer fellow than that handsome, reckless, and conceited youngster, Seppings. Had the late world's whole faculty of medicine risen from its myriad graves in remote space to point out to him that the unfruitfulness of the previous two marriages was as likely as not due to Sylvia rather than to her unlucky husbands he would have turned upon it his booming voice and blown its arguments to shreds with the irresistible gale of blind denial. More and more as the passing months lent to Sylvia the deforming curves

and contours of expectant motherhood, visible glad signs of his triumph, he began to drink deep of the intoxicating cup of victory and inebriated, to assume the mantle of conqueror, the raiment of dictator, the crown of emperor. If in these bold and blatant manifestations Sylvia found him trying, to Brooking and Seppings he was almost offensively

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irritating. But the rest of the camp welcomed him as sheer and unalloyed entertainment. If it kept its tongue tightly wedged against its cheek it nevertheless, in all outward semblance, rendered to him the service and pseudo-homage of his self-assumed rank.

But he was suddenly and uncomfortably shaken from his dreams of splendour by the rough, unceremonious hand of reality. That awakening came only a few weeks before the babe was expected. Sheldringham overtook him upon one of his solitary royal progresses round the camp and slipping an arm into his said quietly, "I want to ask you something, Stiles."

"Go on, my dear fellow."

"It is a question that, as Sylvia's uncle, I feel I have rather more right to ask than anyone else."

"Yes?" with great amiability.

"What arrangements are you making for her confinement? Bluntly, what are you going to do about it?"

Stiles pulled up short. He stared down into Sheldringham's protruding wanly-luminous eyes. For a long minute he said nothing. And then, "Good God! My dear fellow, I don't know at all." With a sudden almost whimpering note, "What *can* I do, my dear fellow? What *ought* I to do?"

"Well, frankly, Stiles, I'm damned if I know. But I suggest you ask the others to discuss the matter with you. Better call a meeting when Sylvia's out of the way for a while and thrash the matter out, get some definite plan or other. It's a ticklish business, you know, Stiles, even with a nurse and a doctor, but——"

"For God's sake, my dear fellow, don't talk like that! Don't you think someone will know something about it? Hoople, for example. Perhaps one of the men's mothers has been a midwife or a monthly nurse or something helpful of that sort. Good Heavens! Sheldringham, I really hadn't thought about it. You don't think," wildly, "anything's likely to happen?"

"It's just that anything *is* likely to happen at such a time

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that's worrying me. But I wasn't proposing to ask the men to the discussion. And in any case a man whose mother had been a midwife is usually the one who knows least about it. And they're pretty frightful, that class of woman, I believe. Hopelessly dirty and superstitious and old fashioned. Empirical kind of old humbugs, I've always heard. Deliver the child by rule of thumb if it kills both."

"That'll do, my dear fellow!" hastily; "I don't think I want to hear that sort of thing. But this meeting. When do you think?"

"The sooner the better. Could you fix it for this evening? Sylvia always goes for a walk after supper and we're not likely——"

"Yes," interrupted Stiles, "yes, this evening, by all means. Good God, Sheldringham, how casual I've been; how simply, damnably thoughtless. That poor child. Good God, yes! Tonight, decidedly."

But although the meeting discussed the impending event from every standpoint, on the one vital issue of what was to be done they came to no useful conclusion. At the end of three-quarters of an hour Hoople said slowly, "The only thing that we can do, apparently, is to leave it to Sylvia."

"That is, to nature," put in Musgrave.

"Or in other words," smiled Delamere, "we do nothing at all."

And upon that uncomfortable note of negation the meeting broke up.

The matter was re-opened upon several occasions as the time of the accouchement drew near but with no other result than a very definite increase of the doubt and anxiety that was already pervading the camp.

They might have saved themselves their pains. Sylvia was not entirely unaware of the disturbed atmosphere nor of the abortive discussions, but she took no notice. She had decided what she was going to do and had no intention of being moved from her purpose. One bright hot April morning Stiles awoke from an uneasy night to find Sylvia missing

from her bed. Within half an hour (a half-hour of quite frenzied search during which hair-raising stories of puerperal madness went whispering about the camp) it was clear that Sylvia had disappeared. Search parties were hastily organised, and were on the point of setting off when Flagg came running breathlessly up to Brooking, saluted and said, "The motor-boat's gone, sir." All notions of further search were abandoned. Stiles shut himself up in his hut, a prey to distracted anxiety and the most morbid fancies. The camp shared his anxiety, if not all his fancies; little work was

done, the men standing about in twos and threes talking in undertones with much head shaking and other traditionally meet gestures. Hoople and Sheldringham, however, refused to be perturbed. "I don't pretend to have a notion what she's up to," said her uncle calmly, "but I'm perfectly certain whatever she's doing is the right thing. It always has been since she was a mite of a child. Not the faintest use to worry nor the faintest need. She'll come back when she thinks fit."

"She's probably cleared out to have the babe in peace and quiet," suggested Hoople, "away from a lot of amateur interference and fussing solicitude. And all things considered, it's the sanest thing she could do. She'll be back in a day or so with the babe in her arms," with an optimism that obstetrics would hardly endorse.

That was all very well for the first day and brought considerable relief to the camp and a certain amount of comfort to the bereaved Stiles, but when a second, a third and a fourth day passed without any sign from her, all the worse doubts and fears returned seven-fold and not all Sheldringham's and Hoople's loudly expressed convictions (a shade too loudly perhaps) that everything was all right succeeded in allaying them.

But on the early morning of the eighth day, just as the camp was astir, Sylvia came back in *Columbus*, anchored the boat, waded ashore and pushed her way through the welcoming and frenziedly delighted men carrying a baby boy in her arms.

It was only when the first joyous outbursts were slowly

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subsiding that the babe's sex protruded itself into the general rejoicings with all its disturbing implications. Stile's stock which, in Musgrave's words, had been at par for the past six or seven months slumped heavily and before nightfall a special emergency meeting was called for the morrow. It was a lively and heated one. Stiles fought with all his forces to retain his kingship, his chief weapon, defensive and, in every meaning of the word, offensive, being the reiterated statement that he had anyhow produced a child (in the excitement of the combat Sylvia's share in the production was, perhaps, pardonably, forgotten) and what he had done once he could do again. He therefore claimed, nay, hotly demanded, the right to try again. And, surprisingly, his vehemence, and doubtless the justice of his claim, gained for him a further twelve months' happiness.

Discussing the matter late that night with Sheldringham, Hoople said whimsically, "Ever noticed, Sheldringham, how bishops always seem to beget boys? Wonder if there's anything in that hoary belief that the sex of a child is always that of the physically weaker partner at the time of conception; that being nature's way of replacing a — a — er — breaking vessel, shall we say?"

"Sounds a trifle far-fetched," smiled Sheldringham. "Does the theory include mental condition as well?"

"It probably did," laughing, "until it was found by acutely unpleasant experience to be too invidious and so was omitted. But I'd like to wager you three packets to two that Stiles's next is a boy also."

"Well, I'll take you, although it's too serious a matter for gambling. But it's certainly only fair to Stiles to allow him a further lease of his kingdom. I wish I knew something about birth statistics and what the odds are against the second child being a different sex from the first."

"No need to worry about statistics," smiled Hoople. "I should say that every birth may be treated as a separate and distinct event having no relation whatsoever to any others before or after. And in that case the odds are even, which

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gives you, in our little gamble, a clear advantage. Now if you'd care for another wager here is a real gamble: I'll bet you an even three ounces that Sylvia doesn't become pregnant again within the next twelve months."

"All right, Hoople, I'll take it, although, frankly, I don't much care about betting on such a matter. Afraid I'm a trifle old fashioned, perhaps, or just sentimental, but it seems a bit indelicate, I mean not as between ourselves y'know, but it's a sort of dragging Sylvia into it. Seems like tempting Providence, too. And damn it all! Hoople, y'know we're confoundedly at the mercy of Providence over this business. It's no joke at all."

"It isn't. And least of all perhaps for the new babe, if there's never another. He's really the most important person in the world and he stands a fair chance of being the most miserable. The only child in a family's bad enough, but to be the only child in the world, Sheldringham, is likely to be just damnable. I most sincerely hope I lose both my bets, although it'll mean a fortnight without tobacco, a pretty unendurable prospect."

Hoople, however, won his cigarettes but lost his tobacco. Within three months of the wagers being made Stiles, his face alight with pride,

proclaimed one morning at breakfast that Sylvia was again pregnant. Exactly eight weeks before the expiry of his second year of kingship Sylvia once more disappeared with *Columbus*, to return a week later with another baby boy. Stiles's chagrin, to ignore his other sharper emotions, was abysmal. At a meeting held three days later he made no attempt to fight, surrendering without a word his kingdom and his happiness. One concession was made him and it was granted unasked: that his successor should not be chosen until his full year had run its course and until then he was to retain all his rights and privileges, in so far as the jurisdiction of the meeting went.

That seven weeks' interregnum was marked by one note-worthy event: the final removal of Sid from the cook-house and his installation into the permanent office of nannie. The

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ever-resourceful Flagg had managed to construct a tolerable perambulator and Sid's first official promenade pushing Victor, Sylvia's first-born, was made the excuse for an unofficial holiday by the men, who formed a cheering *cortège* behind the vehicle with its crowing inmate and its crimson and furious propellant.

Ferguson and Clark laboured that night designing, cutting out and making a natty nurse's uniform which they took to Stiles the next morning with the grave suggestion that Sid ought to wear it, at least when out with the 'pram. With extraordinary insensitiveness Stiles warmly agreed and, sending for Sid, proffered the gaudily beribboned garments.

"I want you to wear this, Larkins, when you are out with Master Victor."

"You want what, sir?" unable to believe his eyes or his ears.

"To wear this uniform, Larkins," a trifle testily. What a dense fellow Larkins was. "Take it and try it on. If it doesn't quite fit we'll have it altered." Had he been looking at Sid's face its tense drawn fury might have warned him of the coming outburst. But he was manicuring his nails and went serenely on. "You shall have a still smarter one later on."

"I'll — I'll ——" gasping and struggling for articulation — "I'll see you in hell first."

Stiles dropped his nail-file and stared in stupent, appalled amazement. His horrified, outraged glance went to Sid's face and he saw that his eyes were filled with the tears of insupportable anger.

“God bless my soul, Larkins! What’s wrong with you? D’you know what you’re saying? You must have a touch of the sun.”

“I know what I’m saying. Think I’m going to wear those slops. Not me. Wear ’em yourself. And Seppy can murder me like he murdered the other two.”

“Kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday,” mumbled Stiles in a bewildered voice. “God bless my soul! The youngster’s stark, raving mad. Go away, man, go away. Leave the

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uniform if you don’t like it. The day will come when you’ll be proud to wear it. Or if not you ought to be. Anyhow, we’ll leave it till then. Go away, do, and in consideration of your former services we’ll overlook this outburst. Be off now and give Master Victor his lunch.”

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When the time came to choose Stiles’s successor to the passionately coveted post of temporary husband and consort, Sheldringham put in a vehement claim that his name should be added to those of Musgrave, Hoople and Delamere, now the only remaining three candidates. Delamere objected, as he agreed, with frank cynicism, upon purely selfish grounds; Musgrave refused to give an opinion; Brooking and Seppings confessed to an entirely open mind on the matter while Stiles still maintained his former position that the union would be an incestuous one and therefore against the welfare of the race. It was Hoople in the end who turned the scale in Sheldringham’s favour and won for him the desired equality of opportunity. “I think,” he said, “that Stiles’s fears are quite groundless and his incestuous argument won’t stand examination. Let us assume for the moment that the marriage would be incestuous. Is that a particularly alarming condition? One likely to have the dire results Stiles has so hair-raisingly described? Does biology bear him out? I don’t think so. Does history? The Pharaohs always took a sister to wife for the purpose of the succession and we have no knowledge that the offspring of these incestuous embraces were subnormal mentally or physically. Biologically, of course, incestuous matings are a commonplace among breeders of dogs, horses and birds and it is done with the object of strengthening rather than weakening the strain. Stiles spoke of it as ‘this abhorrent suggestion.’ I confess I heard

that with extraordinary and somewhat amused surprise: Stiles's literary god, as we all know — to our cost, may I say? — being Shelley. And Shelley held that incestuous love in any or all of its closest manifestations — brother and sister, father and daughter, son and mother —

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is at least as high and fine a form of human love as any other. You may say that this was merely a corollary of his passionate love of freedom in all its forms, especially the freedom of the emotions and that, as he claimed the right of a son to hate and to curse a father or a mother, it followed logically that there must be an equal freedom to love a mother or a sister. Shelley's *Revolt of Islam*, which we are all aware is Stiles's second Bible, was first published under the title of *Laon and Cythna* and the hero and heroine were lovers as well as brother and sister. But I am not to be understood as an advocate of incestuous love. By no means. I merely drag in Shelley to point out Stiles's quite ludicrous inconsistency. Indeed I will borrow Stiles's word abhorrent and admit that the love embraces of brother and sister, son and mother, father and daughter, are to me abhorrent, repellently abhorrent, and, I should surmise, to most other people. But because, for reasons too complex to attempt now to unravel, such love *does* appear repulsive that is no reason to go beyond the plain facts and to make claims of disastrous consequences that those facts will not support. And most decidedly the facts will not support them. Young Bolderwood, who was killed in the War, would have become, by general competent musical opinion, the greatest composer of his time, had he lived. Bolderwood was the child of a brother and sister. I will agree, if you like, that that proves nothing and I merely mention it in passing. But the whole point of the position as it concerns us is that Sheldringham and Sylvia are *not* to any reasonable view so akin as to render their marriage incestuous. The notion is absurd. I'm not discussing the legal aspect. That, after all, is a matter of geography and chronology. Merely the humanly reasonable aspect, and that is that Sylvia's father and Sheldringham were brothers. Since that is all their blood relationship amounts to I most decidedly support his claim. And to end by harking back to incestuous love, I'm inclined to think that the test of all matings should be the emotional reactions of the parties concerned and that where abhorrence and repulsion would be felt then, *ipso facto*, that mating should be considered

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as incestuous. But I am merely labouring an irrelevancy. To my mind the question doesn't arise, and therefore not only has Sheldringham every right to equality in this matter but we owe him an apology for barring him out on previous occasions."

While Hoople was, in Stiles's angry phrase, adumbrating his obscene sophistries, and winning Sheldringham's case, the men, barely a stone-throw away, were holding a meeting where views were being expressed less ably worded perhaps than those of Stiles and Hoople but decidedly not less vehement. But it was their own claims and not those of Sheldringham that they were discussing with so vast an expenditure of breath and heat. Considering Ferguson's frequently expressed indifference upon the matter it is noteworthy that it was his speech which swept the meeting to the decision to fight for their rights. He did, however, point out that he was not at all concerned with the woman side of the business, but merely with the general question of their rights as members of the community. "And so," he had ended, "I say that whatever's going we ought to share in, ought to have done from the beginning, and anyhow from now onwards we'll see that we do. Make no mistake about it, they won't give it. We've got to take it. It's got to be settled, this business, and I reckon it's now or never. And don't kid yourselves it's going to be a soft bit of a scrap, Queensberry rules and all that. It's going to be a dogfight. My oath it is that! And we want to know just what we're going to do before we start in on it. *That* I reckon's all we've got to talk about now."

And so, while Hoople expatiated with glib gravity upon the rights, wrongs, privileges and limitations of human love, there gathered within stone-throw a storm that was presently to invade their almost academic discussion with the gross starkness of physical force.

CHAPTER VIII

BRIEF REIGN OF DIGGER WELLS AND OTHER MATTERS

FLAGG, backed up by Ferguson, Priestly, Fish and Archer, had carried his suggestion that they should first state their demands before resorting to stronger measures. But in the event battle was joined within ten seconds of the men's forcible entry into Brooking's hut and in less than five minutes the whole aspect of the quasi-communal life of the camp had undergone a complete and violent change.

The men had armed themselves with spanners, short iron bars, table-knives pointed and sharpened, and pieces of rock, loose or twisted up simply in canvas slings; but these were hidden in their clothing.

Stiles was shuffling the cards preparatory to dealing them to Musgrave, Hoople, Delamere and Sheldringham when the men burst in.

"Outside!" rasped Seppings, jumping to his feet and drawing his automatic. And with that abrupt disyllable pandemonium broke loose. A jagged piece of rock caught Seppings on the jaw as he fired point blank at Ferguson. The bullet went wide, ricocheted from one of the men's iron bars and striking the butt of Brooking's automatic, exploded the cartridges, wrecked the weapon and tore his fingers to shreds. And then the melee closed over Brooking and Seppings. Two more shots crashed out; there sounded the repeated dull chug of metal upon flesh and bone and then suddenly, as if drawn aside by a great hand, the men drew away and a racking silence replaced the bloody clamour.

Flagg lay dead with a bullet through his heart. Brooking, his skull stove in, was crumpled up half under the table. Seppings,

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his face smashed and ghastly, lay supporting himself on his elbow. His other hand was pressed to his breast and between his fingers the blood pulsed out and dripped to the floor.

And as they stood about the bodies gazing in dismayed wonder at the havoc of a few minutes, Samuel "Digger" Wells, area thief, racing tipster, ex-Borstal boy, boozer and repressed amorist stepped out of the circle and, turning swiftly, faced them with Seppings's automatic steadily levelled. "Back, you!" he grinned. "I'm boss here now. Keep your bleedin' distance.

First man who moves I shoot, so 'elp me Gawd." He moved over and dragged Brooking's body from under the table and still keeping the automatic levelled, hurriedly searched the corpse. He withdrew a small ring of keys. "Key of the boozier!" he said, pocketing it. "That's that."

He shoved the body roughly aside and, walking over to Seppings, said, "Where's the ammo, kept? Spit it out."

A faint smile twisted Seppings's lips. He shook his head slowly. He tried to speak, but it was some time before he could manage to articulate. And then whisperingly, "There's none, you murderous hound. You've tipped another loser." The welling blood between his fingers suddenly spurted, and with a gasp he toppled over upon his face.

Wells turned him over with his boot. "Mutton," he said with a grin. "No more ammo., hey? Well, I've three bullets here for anyone what wants 'em. I'm king of this joint and I've got a few words to say to my subjicks."

"Turn it down, Digger!" said Ferguson quietly, stepping a pace forward, "and hand over that shooter."

"Keep your distance, Shiner," threatened Wells. "I've no quarrel with, you, but s'welp me, if you come any nearer you'll have it."

"Hand it over!" snapped Ferguson.

"Get back, you bloody fool!"

"Hand it over!"

"Well, *have* it, then!" He fired point-blank and Ferguson sagged, swayed and dropped with, a bullet through his head.

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"Two left!" roared Wells, his eyes flaming, his mouth agape and the sweat pouring off his face. "Who'll have 'em?" He swung the automatic round in a level semi-circle and the men drew back against the wall.

"No one. Right-o. Shows your bleedin' sense. Now listen. Stand up, you — you," sarcastically, "*gents*" gesturing towards Hoople and the other three. "Slippy! That's the ticket. Now keep your ears open all the lot of you. I'm the king of this little joint and there's going to be no more gents. Got me? Share and share alike all around. See?" Grinning, "You shares what I don't want. I'm thirty-five, I am, and for thirty-five bleedin' years I been bottom-dog. Well, I'm top-dog now and don't forget it. Got me? I'm king. I got no blinkin' crown but this here," waving the automatic, "is the wha's name, sceptre, ain't it? King, my cock-o'lorums, I am and over there," jerking his thumb behind him in the direction of Stiles's hut, "is the queen.

Got me? And we don't need no sky-pilot to marry us. Hear that, Stilesey? *And* the honeymoon starts to-night, so," leering, "we don't want any bleedin' disturbances round the house. Got that? Well, you can work it out in bye-byes to-night. You're all going early. Toot sweet. Fall in! Slippy! Double file. Put a jerk in it, Vere de Vere. I'll have some of that fat o' yours down before you're much older. Mark time. Lift those pigeon-toed webs o' yours up, Piper. Left right! Left right! Up with those plates o' meat, Vere de Vere. That's better. 'Shun. Stan' easy. One more word to my dear subjicks. Straight to your huts you're going now. No supper. Hard cheese you won't get your wedding-breakfast, but as I said before me and the missis can't be disturbed. Straight to your huts and into bye-byes. I'll be round in 'alf an hour and Gawd 'elp the man 'at's not tucked in. Mussy! You and Stilesey'll bury this truck here after revally. 'Shun. Door open, Piper. Quick march! *Left! right! left! right! left! right!*"

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Shortly afterwards Wells pushed open the door of Sylvia's combined bedroom, sitting-room and boudoir and entered,

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slamming the door behind him. Sylvia, who was silting in a low wooden chair suckling the babe, Richard, looked up quickly to find Wells grinning down at her.

"What do you want, Wells?" his grin stirring her to a vague uneasiness.

"Come to look at my quarters, m'dear."

She stared at him blankly, dismayed, repelled, furious, but before she could answer he came over to her, stooped, tilted her face roughly upward and kissed her mouth with lustful hunger. She made no attempt to push him away, finding it impossible to think coherently, to still the trembling of her legs, to overcome the sudden dull nausea that had invaded both mind and body. Abruptly she realised the meaning of those recent noises which only now she recognised as the sound of firing. He released her mouth and sat back on the bed. "That's right, my gel," he said approvingly. "I been doing a bit of talking to my subjicks and I'm going to do a bit now to my missis. I'm king of this joint and this here," producing the automatic, "is m' sceptre. And you're," his eyes upon her beauty, with hungry gusto, "m' queen. Queen o' m' heart. Married we are, my lass, and the honeymoon

starts toot sweet. And,” fiercely, “no hanky-panky. I’ve won fair and square. There ain’t another shooter in the whole joint and I’ve the only ammo. Got me? O.K. then. Any hanky-panky, my gel, and Gord ’elp you. Or Gord ’elp the nipper. See? Twist his neck like a rabbit, I will, s’welp me Christ. But,” more amiably, “I can see you’re going to be O.K., too. Good wives get good ’usbands and you’ll find me one o’ the best, missis,” menacingly, “s’long as you don’t try no hanky-panky. See? Got me? Right. Now I’m going to tell you a bit about m’self. ’Ow much longer’s that kid going to suck? A’right. Don’t mind me. Pretty picture you make, anyway. Tell you all about m’self. Wife ought to know all about ’er ’usband. On’y fair. P’raps not *all*,” leering, “but somethin’ anyhow. Never had a dad, I didn’t. Bastard I was. Don’t mind telling *you*. Good start for a kid, hey? And m’ mum was a bit o’ no good, though I says it m’self. Hopped it when I was four and left me on the

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parish. So I starts all over again. ’Nother bloody good start, hey? Ten years in the Grubber I had then. Yers. Work’ouse school and work’ouse ’ome. More kicks than ’apence I’m telling you. And a good *honest* job found for you at fourteen. In a bakery, mine was. ’Prentice an’ all that. All signed up proper with m’ name at the bottom. Get up at three winter and summer and go to bed at ’leven. And sweat all the bleedin’ day into the dough. Fair pours off you into the dough it does. But when you’re not sweatin’ you’re coughin’ and ’ockin’. Well, I hopped it. Took after Mum, hey? And found a good job for m’self. Pinchin’. Knockin’ things off. Area sneak-thief and all that. Then *I* was pinched. Six strokes with the birch. Don’t sound much, do it? Depends on the bloke what lays it on. I struck a bastard; ’bout seven feet high ’e was and he put all his guts behind it. Bled like a stuck pig. An’ what’s more,” with a bitter grin, “’e give me seven, the snot. Pinched again afore I was ’ealed and got another six and a free ticket to Borstal. ‘Four years’ dissipperline will make a man of you, my lad,’ the old sod said in court. It did that. Bet your life. Lived by my wits when I come out. Bookie’s clerk, tipster and — and other things you wouldn’t believe if I tol’ you. So I won’t. Then I backed a winner and won ten thick ’uns and had a week’s booze-up. And when I woke up, as you might say, I was in the bleedin’ Navy. An’ if it was any different from Borstal *I* didn’t notice it. All right for those ’t like it. But I wasn’t one of ’em. So I hopped it again. Mum’s boy. But they got me. Fond o’ me they was. Bet your life. Ninety

days in cells. So I hopped it again. *And* they got me again. 'Nother ninety days *and* a flogging. Don't believe it, hey? Show you m' back in a minute. Don't flog men in the Navy, don't they? Quite right. On'y boys. On'y their fun that is. Boy up to twen'y. Sounds like a bleedin' riddle, don't it? When's a man not a man? When 'e's a boy." With a harsh laugh, "When 'e's in the bleedin' Navy. Kid finished? Good egg. So've I, a'most. 'Bout time, hey? Been in Navy seventeen years if you count the last five. Thirty-five I am now, m'dear. And I been bottom dog all the time. And now I'm

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top dog. King o' this little joint and just married. And honeymoon 'bout to begin. I'm off for a squint round t' see all the boys are in bye-byes. Now you hop into bed and I'll bring back a bottle or two of die doings and we'll have our wedding breakfast in bed. No hanky-panky, mind. And you don't want any clobber on in bed. See? I sleeps in the bull m'self and I expects my missis to. Got me? Give's another kiss," pulling her to him and thrusting his mouth to hers. He released her mouth and stood up breathing deeply, his eyes flaming, his hands, which were still pawing her breasts, trembling violently. "Get a bit of grub ready," hoarsely. "So long. Back in a jiffy."

He returned about half an hour later with two bottles of champagne and a bottle of whisky. A reeking pipe fumed behind him as he walked.

Sylvia lay in bed, her eyes closed, the clothes pulled up around her throat. Plates containing sardines, meat, bread and tinned fruit were on the table.

He put down the bottles and, coming over to the bed, whipped back the clothes and stood staring down at her bronzed naked body. "Gawd!" he said thickly. And dropping the clothes over her he sat down upon the bed and began dragging at his boots with clumsy shaking fingers.

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The brief reign of Digger Wells was by no means an unmixed evil. Certainly he assumed the role of dictator, but it was a quite surprisingly impartial dictatorship and, for the first time since the inauguration of the camp, there was complete equality, and if its main feature was an equality of service which was often tyrannically harsh and arbitrary, yet all were in the same boat. Much of that service indeed consisted of fetching and

carrying for the personal needs and whims of Wells. The ordinary work of the camp (now just emerging from chaos as a definitely hopeful task) and exploring was allowed to lapse almost completely and all hands were set to the task of constructing a palace and laying out a garden for

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the king and queen as Wells, when in his cups (which was usually any time after breakfast) insisted on their being styled. But there was plenty of leisure; work began each day at seven and ended at noon and despite the new regime of seven working days a week no one was disposed to grumble. And while Wells indulged his appetites to the full, in the matter of food, drink and tobacco, he showed himself unexpectedly generous. The tobacco ration was doubled and every evening supper was replaced by a meal obviously modelled upon the long-remembered spread that Brooking had given to celebrate his marriage; nor was the final touch of a tot of whisky or rum omitted from each night's feast.

To Sylvia, apart from an often drunken and at all times violently passionate uxoriousness, he was a considerate husband, schooling himself to a rough and clumsy gentleness in act and even in speech that would have amazed the others. Undoubtedly he was savouring to his fullest capacity the blisses of a paradise of all the senses un hoped for, scarcely dreamed of, in his worldly experience. Hitherto life had offered him little but its rough edges, brutality, force and a monotonous servitude, varied by occasional gross and sordid pleasures, stolen or bought. And now had come this incredible piece of jam; now he had won for himself, by the swift act of a moment, a position of power, privilege and unlimited enjoyment that he would not have exchanged for the promise of a thousand heavens. And so, with the easy generosity of the still strong and unsated voluptuary, he found it gratifying to lavish some of the good things upon those who ministered to his pleasures. That sharing of the good things was, too, an unconscious expression of his need to show gratitude for favours received. It was with him an inherent need but it had had so little opportunity of emerging that it had become atrophied, withered, moribund. But now he had come into his sensual kingdom it grew and strengthened and presently became an unsuspected motive in most of his actions.

And Sylvia endured him. There was nothing else to be done. His rough brutality of speech and action had been engendered

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by fear of the apparently harsh and cruel forces of law and authority plus a long-existing conviction that he'd never had a square deal out of life; and as that fear slowly vanished and that conviction was at last so incredibly proved baseless there began to struggle up out of the darkness, like the shoots of spring, all manner of odd and not unengaging or unlovable traits. He would, if no one were watching, crawl about the floor with Victor, or sit with the babe in his lap singing it lugubrious hymns in a growling voice of unbelievable tunelessness. At times when Sylvia was suckling the infant, he would sit watchfully silent, bending forward in his chair, his clasped hands hanging down between his legs, his lips moving as if in rhythm with the infant's sucking, but his eyes on Sylvia's face. Aloof, remote, hostile, sullied and outraged, she could nevertheless not remain indifferent to that watching stare and presently, finding it becoming intolerable, would glance up and hold his look, when he would turn his eyes away and shift uneasily in his chair. And while he kept his eyes from her she studied with a never lessening disgust the heavy face and thick-lipped mouth, the large coarse nose, the deep-set small eyes under a wide, low forehead where the black wiry hair began but a fingerbreadth above the shaggy eyebrows. That overt and contemptuous appraisal would travel down over the rounded muscular shoulders, down the corded arms to the ugly, stubbed, nail-bitten fingers, and thence to the sinewy legs and cramped distorted toes. The inquisition over, her glance would leave him and presently that watching stare would return to her face. Once, when her nerves were fretted beyond endurance under that unintermittent watching he had snapped the tension by saying, "Wish he was my nipper." And then, on a grotesquely appealing note, "Don't you, missis?" That sudden revelation of feeling, coupled with that preposterous question, almost imbecile in its blind misunderstanding and leaden insensitiveness, staggered her for a moment and then, looking over to him and catching an almost hang-dog expression of appeal in his eyes, she felt herself on the verge of sudden uncontrollable hysteria. A mad laughter

began to clamour for outlet. She dredged her mind for a jesting vehicle to carry her laughter. She felt her blood surging up over her throat and face. He noticed her distress and misjudged it as utterly as was possible. "Don't you, missis?" he repeated. But the repetition of that blind imbecility came to her rescue and brought back complete self-control. She considered him

calmly. She removed the nipple from the babe's mouth before she spoke. "Do you think so?" she said calmly in a tone that even his folly could not misinterpret. Sudden veins corded themselves about his temples, his eyes congested, a pulse throbbed in his throat. "Stow it!" he said bitterly. "Stow it. Don't look at me like that. D'y'hear?" Harshly, menacingly, "If I catch ——" his voice trailing away as he jumped to his feet and strode to the door.

There was perhaps some excuse for his crass misreading of the real state of affairs and of Sylvia's feelings towards him. For many weeks in the hut there had been growing an atmosphere of quiet domesticity due in the main to his own changed attitude to life and his increasing emotional content, but from which Sylvia's habitually aloof manner did not noticeably detract. It was perhaps pardonable then that, basking in the blissful warmth so largely due to Sylvia's presence, he should tend to ascribe to her some measure of those feelings now lighting up and revivifying his own heart. The pain of the stab that had forced a partial realisation upon him he obliterated by a drunken carouse that lasted three days, but its memory was not obliterated, nor that realisation lost. For a while it stemmed the slowly growing tide of his affections and might in time have dammed it altogether.

As he had misread matters so sadly in his domestic environment so he had begun to misinterpret the quiet atmosphere that seemed to have descended upon the camp. It was not, as he supposed, a contented settling-down under the new regime, but a merely temporary acquiescence that was largely a reaction from the startling excitements of the upheaval. There would doubtless soon have been a similar harsh awaking for him. The effect of such a double shock might well

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have driven him back to the brutalities of the first days of his dictatorship. But he had shown no very obvious signs of moving in that direction when his kingship was threatened by an enemy stronger, subtler, and better armed than himself, a foe that came suddenly in the night and whose first onslaught brought it within an ace of immediate victory.

It came as a smashing stroke of pain that woke him out of restless sleep just after dawn. He sat up suddenly in bed, clutching at his belly and wondering whether it might not, after all, have been only a nightmare. But even as he played hopefully with that thought the red-hot iron fingers of an invisible hand gripped and wrung his bowels and then released him,

sweating and trembling and bawling for help, for brandy, for Sylvia. And now the strokes followed thick and fast and each was followed by a wave of swimming nausea. In a brief moment of ease he tried to clamber from bed to get the brandy but a paralysing thrust caught him on the bed-edge and he dropped back with a groan. Sylvia awoke and, sitting up, stared blankly at him as he sat doubled up, his hands gripping his belly, his mouth agape, his face a grey mask of sweat, stark fear staring out of his bloodshot eyes.

“Brandy, get me the brandy!” he gasped. “Hurry up. Oh, Gawd!”

He snatched the bottle from her and, dragging out the cork, tilted half the contents down his throat. As he lowered the bottle, another violent pain seized him and, raising the bottle again, he nearly drained it. “That’s better,” he gasped, dropping back on to the pillow.

“Bring Hoople here,” harshly. “Go on, dam’ you! Look slippy! I’m dying.”

She turned away to hide the wild hope in her eyes, slipped on some clothes and hurried out of the room. She returned in a few moments with Hoople.

“What’s wrong, your majesty?” he asked gravely.

The pains were now less acute and their periodicity less frequent. “Ow should I know? And you can stow that guff. My guts is being torn to bits!”

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“What have you been eating?”

“Same as anybody else. Oh, Gawd amighty!” wrenching at his belly, “it’s coming back again. Can’t you give me something? Don’t stand there like a bloody fool or I’ll let daylight into you,” dragging the automatic from the belt he wore round his naked waist. “No! Stop there. Keep your distance. None o’ that, you——”

“Is that where you feel the pain? Where your hand is?”

“Plum’ there. Like someone pulling my guts out with red-hot pliers. What is it?”

“Well, I’m not a doctor, but I should say it’s an acute attack of appendicitis.”

“An’ what’s that?” again feeling easier. “Poison? Some snot been trying _____”

“Poisoning it is. But you’ve poisoned yourself.”

“What the hell d’you mean? If you——”

“I mean you’ve been poisoning yourself with too much food and drink for the last three months and quite possibly for the past thirty years. But you were then working off most of the bad effects and so escaped. Lately you——”

“Stow it! I don’t want a sermon. Can you cure it?”

“I could operate on you if you think you could stand it. But, of course ——”

“Open me up? That’s your game? What sort of a fool d’you take — oh, bloody hell! Give me another bottle of brandy.”

“I should leave brandy alone. You won’t stand a ghost——”

“Stow it and pass me a bottle. And if you can’t do anything, send me someone who can. Send me old ’Oly Joe Stilesey.”

Stiles was even less comforting. “No food and no drink except water for three days,” he said pontifically; “and you may pull through. If not——”

“Outside, you old ——!” roared Wells, levelling his automatic, “and tell Shelly to come here.”

Sheldringham, however, did not come but in his place Hoople returned. He waited till a torrent of profanity had passed and then said boldly, “Look here, Wells, I’ve told you what you’ve got and the only thing you can do is what Stiles

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told you. We’ve no drugs of any sort and you must grin and bear it. If you keep swilling brandy you’ll die. Poulticing will ease the pain. I’ll get Sylvia ——”

“Keep her away!” with sudden bitterness. “I don’t want her in the room. D’y’hear?” His voice dropping to a whisper as a fresh spasm tore him, “I believe you’re the only bleeder I can trust. Look here, Piper ol’ man, see me through this and I’ll go shares. Stop with me and I’ll do what you tell me.”

Hoople considered gravely the sweating, pain-contorted face. “Very well, I’ll look after you. But you’ll have to do as you’re told.”

“A’right. ’S long as there’s no hanky-panky. I’m still top-dog, don’t forget,” sticking the muzzle of the automatic out of the bedclothes. Sarcastically, “Not going to ask me for that, I suppose? Thanks. Now buzz off and get on with those poultices.”

He became easier in the course of the day and after frequent poulticing, the pain became less sharp. He ceased to ask for brandy, contenting himself with hot water. By nightfall he felt himself growing so drowsy that the fear

of an attack upon him while he slept urged him to a further appeal to Hoople's goodwill. "I can trust you, Piper ol' man," he said over and over again. "Stop here and see me through and I'll not forget it. Say you'll stop here all night in case I drop off."

"All right, I'll stay."

Somewhere about three the next morning Hoople, who had been for the last hour struggling against an overpowering desire for sleep, dozed off. He awoke with a violent start at the crashing noise of a shot. Almost at once a second shot, strangely muffled, rang out. The bed in the darkness was a darker heap of struggling confusion. There were mingled the noise of blows and the sound of heavy gasping breath and a horrifying, ceaseless gurgle. Hoople jumped for the bed. A vast mound rose up, seemed to hover above the bed, and then rolled to the floor. He drew back and fumbled about on the floor for his torch. He found it and switched the light on to the heap. Delamere, blood oozing thickly from his mouth, lay crouching

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upon the body of Wells, whose throat was still gripped fast by the giant hands. Hoople wrenched at Delamere's shoulder and he fell over upon his side, but his grip still held. He lay strangely still and silent and the body he gripped was equally still. As Hoople stooped once more over them the door was flung open and Sheldrington, Priestly and Musgrave hurried in with lanterns. They pulled the dead men apart. There was a small, neatly-drilled hole an inch to the right of Delamere's breastbone. His shirt was blackened with smoke. There was a similar small hole in Well's throat around which the blood was already congealing in a great clot that was slowly swelling like a bubble about to burst. Around the clot the flesh was seared and blackened.

The three men stared blankly into one another's faces in the yellow lantern light now paling in the broadening dawn.

"Where's Hoople?" asked Musgrave suddenly in a thick whisper. All three turned and stared about the room. The door opened and Hoople entered. "Both dead, aren't they?" he asked. The others nodded. "So that reign's over," resumed Hoople calmly.

"And a worse one prevented," said Musgrave grimly, glancing down at Delamere's body.

"And I've just scotched a third," added Hoople.

"What d'you mean?" asked Sheldrington.

Hoople held up a key. "Recognise that? I picked it off the bed five minutes ago, just before you came in. I've been up to the store and smashed every jar and bottle of booze there. Our late ruler's sceptre is now also powerless. We may begin again."

"If it's worth the labour," said Sheldringham dully. In the blended lights his face looked wan and ghastly and he seemed a frail old man in the last stages of weary decrepitude.

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It was not until two months after the deaths of Wells and Delamere that the matter of Sylvia's re-marriage was considered.

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Of the nineteen men who had faced the task of creating a new world there were left after seven years only eleven: Hoople, Sheldringham, Stiles, Musgrave; Priestly and Fish, the two big taciturn Cornishmen; Archer, the slow-speaking Suffolk man; Dixon, Scott and Nobby Clark, the three Cockneys, and Sid. They had, however, in Stiles's words, received two men-children from God's hands: Victor, now aged eighteen months and Richard, an infant of six months. With Sylvia the community now numbered fourteen.

All anxiety in the matter of food supplies had now passed; the earth everywhere was renewing its life in grass, flowers, vegetables and hopeful saplings. There was an abundance of corn, barley, oats and potatoes; there were also melons, many kinds of bush-fruits and grapes. And with the return of the sea, whose waves now lapped the northern boundaries of the camp, had come the discovery that once again as in the first creation there was life in the waters, and before the end of the sixth year, fish had replaced tinned meats in the camp dietary. But beyond the life in the water there was no other; birds, beasts and insects all seemed to have perished with mankind.

The seven years had not passed without leaving its mark upon the survivors. Most of them had indeed aged strikingly in appearance and in some cases, notably Sheldringham, in physical powers. Only Musgrave at fifty-eight, Hoople at fifty-three, Sylvia at twenty-nine and Fish at thirty-nine, seemed unchanged by the passage of the years.

Sheldringham, now sixty-five, looked an old man, and his gait, his stooped shoulders, his grey hair and moustache and wan, lined face seemed to mark the premature onset of senility. Stiles, at fifty-seven, would have passed for a man ten years older. Completely bald now except for a grey fringe behind the ears, the booming resonance had gone from his voice, his knees sagged and the fleshy contours of his florid face were pouching, the plump roundness of his body becoming slackly obese; the prideful virility of his two triumphant years seemed utterly to have forsaken him.

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Archer, Dixon, Priestly and Scott had grown beards, and these, surprisingly grey, aged them in appearance far beyond their forty years.

But Sid had undoubtedly changed most of all and only in his case was it a change for the better. Those seven years which had in many ways treated him so little differently from his previous twenty, offering him snubs, contemptuous tolerance and humiliating tasks and offices, had not only stiffened, toughened and broadened his body and tightened his slack mouth but, by some strange hidden alchemy, had begun to put an assurance into his stride, a challenge into his glance, a determined obstinacy into his mind. It was only a beginning, little more perhaps than a promise, but it was an unmistakable one. There was passing from his face that abashed hang-dog look that had so often betrayed him and delivered him into the hands of the brazen and self-confident enemy. In the setting of his lean bronzed face his small features seemed now to have lost much of their insignificance, his eyes, grown brighter, were slowly learning to challenge look with look and that final crown of his physical meanness, the mat of mouse-coloured hair, had been bleached by the sun to a pallid gold of quite surprising comeliness. In strange inexplicable fashion his metamorphosis had begun; changes were taking place, hidden and secret, open and displayed, but they were yet so gradual, so comparatively slight, that they were unobserved, unguessed at; the larva was not yet become the cysalid, but the slow inevitable metamorphic march had begun and the imago even then was there had there been prophetic eyes to see it.

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The evening before the meeting which was to choose a new husband for Sylvia, a new hope for humanity, she set off after supper for a long walk.

As the meeting had drawn near, she had at different times approached Sheldringham, Musgrave and Hoople, demanding that the choice should be left to her and suggesting that they should win over the men to this view,

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but their very reasonable and logical objections, coupled with a blunt refusal to give the men the slightest grounds for suspecting that there was an attempt to hoodwink them, drove her to accept finally as inevitable the way of life circumstance had forced upon her.

She had walked barely a mile when the sound of hurrying footsteps behind her caused her to slacken her pace and look round over her shoulder. Even the semi-darkness could not make unrecognisable the short spare figure and waddling gait of Hoople. As he came up with her he fell into step with her quickening pace.

Her mind went back to just such a warm summer night six years ago and as then she looked up at the stars pricking out in the deepening blue. It did not seem six years ago and yet it was then only one year after the catastrophe and somehow all her life before that event seemed now not only unreal but incredibly remote in time.

"You know, Sylvia," Hoople was saying, as if in extenuation of something else he'd previously said to which she had paid no attention — "you know, I was sorry not to be able to agree with you." It dawned upon her that he was referring to her appeal to him on the question of her marriage. She wondered idly what else he had been saying but it was not worth bothering about.

"I don't see what else you could have said," indifferently.

"There wasn't, but that doesn't always make a thing less unpalatable."

"And I've no other course but to accept the inevitable."

Hoople did not reply for a moment. "You know," he went on presently, "that we're all in it now. Except," with a smile, "young Larkins."

"So he's being left out."

"So I surmise, but I don't know for certain. I fancy the question hasn't arisen. Probably won't do so. He'll just carry on with his job." Grimly, "After all, the position would be rather — well — anomalous, shall we say? You'd certainly find it embarrassing if the lot fell upon Larkins."

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"Embarrassment is not a particularly humiliating emotion."

“No, Sylvia,” warmly, “I understand only too well, I assure you.”

“Do you?” half sceptically, half mockingly.

“Sylvia.”

“Well?”

“Why not make a bolt for it?”

“With you, do you mean?” calmly.

“Well, yes, I *do* mean that. Clear out together in *Columbus* and start over again somewhere away from — from — all of it,” he ended lamely.

“Is that a swift flash? One of your sudden impulses, or——”

“I’ve thought about it for a long while,” he replied, not altogether truthfully, his previous thoughts on the subject being confined to a mild wonder why she didn’t make her escape from conditions little better — surely — than those of a — well, hardly that, those of a woman of a seraglio — although that didn’t quite fit the facts. That was just the point: there was no precedent to fit the facts.

“In that case you’ve no doubt made all arrangements for the escape — victualled *Columbus* and mapped out our voyage.”

“I’m sorry you don’t take it seriously. Perhaps——”

“But isn’t that just what I *am* doing? It is surely taking it seriously to ensure the voyage will be as safe as forethought can make it.”

“You’ll come, then?” eagerly, unable to believe in his good fortune, and yet with a tiny doubt whether he really wanted it beginning to stir in his mind. He wanted Sylvia. He was quite clear about that. She was by the very nature of the circumstances the loveliest and most passionately-desired of women. He could imagine no more amazing happiness than the lot falling upon him. To live there in the camp as Sylvia’s husband and perhaps to have children by her. He stole a swift look at her as she swung along lissomely by his side. By God! yes; wanting her was a mild way of putting it. But did he want to go right away with her — cut himself off from all the others

— break right away from his associations of the last seven years — give up his cosy hut and the small library — that warm corner of gossip, garrulity and tobacco? There was no need to question that; most emphatically he did *not* want to give up these things. He’d much rather give up an arm or a leg or a not too important portion of his viscera. It would be like closing up for good a dozen chambers of his mind, those dozen chambers where

Musgrave, Stiles and the others lived that strange part of their lives which they could only live in him. There would only be Sylvia's chamber left and those other chambers of his life before the disaster, and so many of those now were cobwebbed, dark, dusty and almost uninhabitable. Was that a profitable exchange? Here, now, walking beside her, subject to the overwhelming influence of the flesh, it seemed not only profitable but desirable above all other things. But would that last? Wouldn't possession stale the beauty of it and make the profit null? He was, after all, a sociable fellow, really fond of his kind; he liked men's company and had usually chosen it in preference to women's. And when this besetting urge, this fretting hunger of the flesh was appeased, what then? Was it even so besetting — so overwhelming? Was complete deprivation of a normal sex life so dreadful? After all, seven years of it hadn't done him much harm. He felt and looked in the prime. And millions of men in the old life had been celibates. Were they any the worse for it? And yet — and yet — damn it all! He ought to have thrashed all this out alone and not attempted it in such close propinquity to — to — what? Yes, temptation it certainly was. The occasional touch of her bare arm upon his as they swung along set desire stirring and drove his careful ratiocinations to headlong flight. What animals we were after all. Little more than mechanisms of reflex action, mere bundles of responses to stimulus. Damnably degrading and humiliating. Repellently so. And yet weren't they the more sweet and intoxicating just——

“I'm afraid not.”

“Er — what — Sylvia?”

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She stopped and barred his progress. He could not see that her eyes were dancing with amusement. “Do you mean to say you've forgotten what we're supposed to be discussing?” she asked in a voice whose simulated anger deceived him.

“Good Lord no, Sylvia! We've just agreed to make a bolt for it.”

“I thought two parties at least were necessary to make an agreement.”

“You mean you——”

“Of course I won't. The very idea is mad, ludicrous. Do you think for a moment,” mockingly, “you could support me in the — er — state to which I've been accustomed? And, more important still, do you really want to?”

“Want to, Sylvia!” vehemently. “Good God, *yes!* I love you. There you are; hang it all, that’s a sound enough basis to begin——”

“Love, like an agreement, needs two parties to make——”

“You don’t love me?”

“Certainly I don’t.”

“Oh,” blankly. After a pause, “You ought to have said so at first, Sylvia,” irritably.

“Did the women always in your books?”

“Damn my books! They’re dead now.” Suddenly grinning, “So are all the others, you know; all the whole crowd of them. What price literary immortality, now, Sylvia? Some of the critics used to take pains to point out that my books were only a sort of inspired journalism, ephemeral stuff, couldn’t possibly live and,” chuckling, “here am I myself still alive and kicking with all the world’s literature dust and ashes. Blown into the middle of next week anyhow.”

“Hardly *next* week, is it? Last decade it would be, wouldn’t it?”

“Figure of speech, my dear Sylvia. But it’s delightfully comical, isn’t it? The world’s literature, by the bye, now consists of but fifty odd volumes — damned odd, some of ’em!—and the world of eleven men, two boys and a woman.”

“Ay!” laughing, “and there’s the rub.”

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Hoople nodded his head in the darkness. “You, you mean? Yes, there it is, or you are. So you won’t run away with me? Not in love with old Musgrave, are you? Or — or — anyone else?”

“What sort of answer do you expect me to give to that sort of question?”

“No, I suppose not,” inadequately. “But, Sylvia.”

“Well?”

“You know,” brightly, “the lot may fall on me.”

“It might do worse. And hasn’t it occurred to you that you can refuse to take up the burden?”

“It hadn’t, but,” smiling, “I’ll put it to the winner. You wouldn’t care for a little wager?”

“What about?”

“Oh,” laughing, “nothing. But I’d like to put that suggestion to Musgrave if he wins; his invective grows in richness with his years.”

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It was agreed at the general meeting the next day that the marriage should only last twelve months unless a girl child were born, in which case a further similar period would be allowed.

“What it boils down to,” said Scott with a grin, “is that you gets a twelvemonth for every girl, don’t it?”

“And nothing for a boy,” said Archer.

“And the Chinks used to drown their girl kids in fousands, so I’ve heard,” put in Nobby Clark. “’S right, Piper, old man?”

“I believe so.”

“Yers, was’e not want not, as my old Mum used to say,” grinned Dixon. “We couldn’t half do with a dozen now. We all here?”

“All present. Oh, where’s Larkins?”

“Larkins? Cheese it, Mussy, old man. Nurse Larkins is bathing the babies. Come on, let’s cut for deal. Lowest deals, ace high.”

Fish cut a two and after carefully shuffling the cards, held

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them between his hands ready to deal and said with a touch of excitement in his voice, “What’s it going to be?”

“Fifth marriage, ain’t it?” said Archer. “Well, then, five o’ hearts. That O.K.?”

The five of hearts being agreed to, Fish began to deal and the first round passed without the card appearing. A second round had a similar result.

“Blimey!” gasped Dixon, “ain’t dropped the bastard, ’ave you, Chippy?”

Fish smiled gravely and began the third round which was also abortive.

“Good Lord!” said Hoople, “this is getting on my nerves. Get them out, Fish.”

Nobby Clark was third from the dealer and as his card fell he let out a whoop of wild delight. “Gawd!” he shouted, “heart is trumps! The good old five. Who wants to kiss the ’and of King Nobby the First!”

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Nobby Clark’s reign endured only a twelvemonth but it had its hour of triumph when Sylvia became pregnant three months after the marriage; and its hour of disappointment when another boy was born. But during his

twelve months of happiness a small flower broke through the rough soil in the heart of the ex-pugilist, victor of a hundred shady fights in London's east end; it was as authentic a flower of poesy as had ever blown in all the ages of romance. And when the moment came he displayed it to blind eyes, proclaimed it to deaf ears: "I'd like to call the nipper Benjamin, if you don't mind, missis," he said to Sylvia.

"I don't mind. Is it your favourite name? Or do you know——"

"No," he interrupted with inexplicable embarrassment, "'tain't that. It's jest — oh, jest because I want it."

It was quite a week later that a sudden thought occurred to Sylvia. "D'you know what Benjamin means?" she asked Hoople.

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He smiled and shook his head. "Not in my line. Stiles might."

Stiles appealed to later furnished a possible key. "My memory's not what it was," sententiously, "hut I believe the name was originally Ben-oni, and meant child of my sorrow. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks. I just wondered."

Sylvia thought the matter over but finally concluded that that was an impossible explanation. She could not know that thirty years previously Nobby Clark's most cherished possession was a dirty little volume entitled: *Christian Names And Their Meanings*, and that by some queer freak of childish inclination he had learned by heart a list of some scores of names and their alleged meanings, which quite useless, valueless and dubious information had remained fresh and bright in his memory while scores of important matters had vanished.

She could not know that. She certainly would not ask him. Had she done so he would not have told her; it was by that token surely an authentic bloom.

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CHAPTER IX

ILLUSTRATES SEVERAL OLD PROVERBS

THE next ten years, while they saw few material changes in the life of the small community beyond such a spreading abundance of fruiting trees, flowers and vegetation that the camp now bore no small likeness to Eden, witnessed a profound if slow and gradual metamorphosis in the outlook of the inhabitants of that new Eden. The initial optimism had been replaced by a pessimism that bordered upon despair. All (save Sheldringham, who had died before fortune favoured him, and Sid, whose non-participation had become an accepted tradition, a tradition as unquestioned, apparently, by him as by the others) had now had Sylvia to wife, but no girl-child had been begotten. Musgrave had sired a boy, Nigel; Priestly twin boys, David and Jonathan; and Hoople a frail mite, Septimus, who had lived only a few hours. The other marriages had been childless. There had been one other death beside Sheldringham's and the infant's, Fish, one of the big Cornishmen, having died of sunstroke barely a month after his marriage.

Stiles's two boys, Victor and Richard, were big fine youngsters of twelve and eleven; Nobby Clark's Benjamin was ten; Musgrave's Nigel four and Priestly's David and Jonathan three. Dixon's year of marriage had come to a fruitless end. He was the last and for nearly six months Sylvia had been without a husband.

There had been one change in the rules governing the marriages, the birth of a boy bringing to its sire a further year's lease of happiness and endeavour. It was a change inspired by the ever-growing atmosphere of pessimism.

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And while husbands came and went in Sylvia's big hut, Sid remained, at first by virtue of his office as nannie and later, as the boys grew bigger, as a combined bodyguard, valet, servant and playmate. Additional accommodation had been added to Sylvia's hut, as necessity arose, so that now, with its nine extra rooms and outhouses stuck on to the original hut, like barnacles on a stone, it formed a grotesquely imposing contrast to the small huts clustered about and had come to be regarded by all if not precisely as the seat of government yet at least as a sort of moot-hall or

gathering-place for the discussion of matters affecting the whole community. At these meetings Sylvia usually presided, although she frequently and designedly stayed away, delegating her authority. Authority over the community she now possessed beyond all question. It was perhaps because it was unquestioned and beyond question that it was the perfection of despotism. It was also the perfection of communism, for surely here at last all things were common and the dream of equality was come to pass — almost. For Sid was the assay that disclosed the dross. He seemed to represent by the dumb challenge of his mistreatment the flaw in all human dreams of perfection, the canker at the rose's heart, the blur in the crystal, the bubble in the pane. It was necessary to eliminate the flaw. Only by its elimination might life endure. For in Sid now rested the sole hope of the survival of mankind.

The realisation of Sid's prime importance to the community was doubtless a slow and gradual growth but the expression of that realisation was sudden, vociferous and almost frenziedly exigent.

The occasion was a meeting of the gardening committee, which included everyone except Sid and his charges and Sylvia. Sylvia's non-inclusion was her own choice.

Gardening had undoubtedly saved the community from despair and had preserved its health, sanity and happiness at a time when a complete disruption and breaking down seemed imminent. A sufficiency of material in the way of soil and seeds did not become available until Year Thirteen and with amazing good-fortune it coincided with the exhaustion of the

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stores of tobacco and cigarettes. This deprivation of a possession that had been their greatest luxury and consolation, coming at a time when all hope of the birth of a girl was fading fast, seemed to emphasise the present unhappiness and the complete aimlessness and worthlessness of future endeavour. The deaths, too, about this time of Sheldringham from senile decay, or lack of the will to live, and of Fish from a mischance that, with slight exaggeration, might be considered as one that daily menaced all of them during the summer months, began to make the burden of creating a new world, which all had so willingly undertaken, appear not only unbearable but useless. They were, it seemed, inevitably doomed to frustration and extinction. Without doubt, had the store of wine and spirits been in existence it would have been used as a means of oblivion whatever

the consequences. Only Sid, Sylvia and the children seemed immune from the general mental and spiritual sickness that had descended upon the camp, and it was due to Sid, although quite fortuitously, that salvation in the shape of gardening came to the camp. As a change from the games he had taught the boys, or they had invented for themselves, he, with their help, planned and laid-out small gardens and set them to work in a competition for the best garden. And the rest followed. It was not a gradual growth, hot at all like a slowly-spreading disease that seizes first one victim and then another; rather was it a swift and sudden epidemic that leaves no one unscathed. Within two years nearly a square mile about the camp was laid out in gardens and here the men worked day in day out, all the year round, of their own free will, such hours as would have driven them, if imposed upon them by discipline, to open rebellion. And then Sylvia took a hand. It was in the early spring of Year Fifteen. She suddenly remembered from her childish days those Flower and Vegetable Shows at which her mother, the Honorable Mrs. Grace d'Arcy Lessing, had been in such frequent request as chief patron and opener. And so the New World Flower Fruit and Vegetable Show was founded and prizes were offered for the best vegetable garden, the best

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flower beds, the most luscious fruits, the gayest flowers and the most prodigious vegetables. No prizes, indeed, were needed to spur on the men to stupendous efforts; nevertheless, when the great day came, there was considerable excitement as to what the prizes could be. The wildest and most fantastic speculation did not approach the happy truth. For the twelve years that the tobacco had lasted, Sylvia, for no reason very clear to herself, had saved half of her weekly ration of cigarettes and the prize-winners in each class had the incredible bliss of receiving each three packets of cigarettes, thirty in all. Amazingly, everyone managed to obtain a prize, and in a speech of gratitude at the banquet which followed the prize distribution Stiles was moved to propose that Sid should receive a consolation prize of one packet as the unwitting begetter of the happier days that had descended upon them. Hoople, seconding, suggested two packets; but without doubt the general opinion was voiced by Nobby Clark's stentorian, "Share and share alike! Give the lad his free packets same as us." The warmth and good-fellowship engendered by what was felt to be a generous thing generously said was still stirring in all hearts when a nipping frost fell upon

it. Sid rose from the small table where he had sat among his boys and said quietly, "Thanks all the same, but I don't smoke now. An' I don't want to. Forgotten what it's like and don't want to start the cravin' all over again." He sat down as unconcernedly as he had risen. In his attitude, in the speech itself and especially in the choice of words, there were a dozen straws to show the direction of an unsuspected wind. The books in Hoople's library, of which Sid had read every one, were now bearing strange fruitage, but no eyes there saw that fecund harvest. Yet some of those present were to remember that speech at another meeting still two years ahead and to wonder why they had been so crassly blind to plain signs and portents. Its immediate effect upon its hearers was simply one of hurt astonishment. It was felt that Sid's refusal of the gift so generously offered was offensive and intruded a disturbing and unpleasant element into a jolly evening.

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The year that followed that banquet was one of steady and unbroken labour in the gardens and a general determination showed itself to raise the next show to a summit of excellence that should set a standard for the future; and by way of piling the Pelion of competitive ardour upon the Ossa of the gardener's traditional devotion to his task Sylvia doubled the prize-list and offered into the bargain a special prize of one hundred cigarettes for any new variety of fruit, flower or vegetable.

All other forms of labour, except the necessary camp duties and chores, were abandoned; exploration, building, repairing and decorating were dropped. It had long been felt that exploration was a hopeless business inevitably entailing a failure and disappointment that cast a gloom upon the camp for days after the return of each abortive expedition, and the whole community was glad to abandon it. Even fishing was fore-sworn for the ardent service of the soil, and only Sylvia's insistence upon a fish menu at least twice weekly forced *Columbus* from her moorings, with a reluctant crew casting envious looks at those remaining behind and longing ones at their distant plots.

And if gardening absorbed all the energies and thoughts of the community it also inspired and monopolised the entire conversation when two or more were gathered together. Gossip knew no other theme; garrulity folded brown hands and asked for no finer topic. The shibboleths of all the gardeners since man first dragged beauty and plenty from the reluctant soil became the camp vernacular. Invective found new metaphors and profanity

fresh similes; but it was the invective and profanity of friendly intimacy, for in the ceaseless struggle to prise open the clenched fingers of Nature's chary hand all old jealousies and animosities were swamped and submerged.

But Sid, who did not labour in the vineyard, was bored by the new camp jargon, further antagonised by the complete preoccupation of everyone with the land and more and more driven for recreation to the company of the boys and for mental food to the cupboards of his own mind. And these

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cupboards were now by no means like those of Mother Hubbard. That his boredom was not unshared by one other is not utterly beyond the bounds of possibility.

The second exhibition did indeed achieve a standard of perfection that it was felt would be hard to sustain, impossible to better. Only in one direction was there disappointment: the discovery of new varieties being limited to a small blue flower found by Scott and happily christened by Hoople Waverley Bell. But it was felt that this failure would provide just that encouragement for the mightiest of efforts for the following year.

But six months before the third exhibition was due the thing happened.

It began, as far as all outward manifestation was concerned, at a meeting of the Gardening Committee or, in other words, a general camp meeting attended by everyone except Sylvia, Sid and the boys.

Stiles, an old and bent man, now approaching seventy, suddenly broke into a warm, eager discussion with, "Is it worth all this talk, all the heat, this struggle, this endeavour?" His tone was a diminuendo closing on a mumble, and it is doubtful if anyone heard the last words; but sufficient had been heard to provoke a storm of startled disapproval.

"What the devil are you driving at, Stiles?" snapped Musgrave. "Worth it? Why, damn it all, man! Tell us something more worth while and we'll listen to you."

Stiles sat still, his big shoulders stooped over the table, his bald wrinkled head hanging, his eyes closed over their pouches, his mouth a wavering line down-drooped at the corners. He looked in that moment the incarnation of weary, spent and disillusioned eld. He opened his dull eyes slowly, lifted his head, and fired his devastating shot. "Very well: a baby girl." And in one shattering second their world was shaken from its happy orbit and flung out into the icy spaces of unrest and gloom and discontent.

“Blast the old fool!” Musgrave muttered to Hoople. “Why, in the name of thunder, did he want to drop that bombshell?”

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Hoople shrugged his shoulders. “The sleeping dogs are awake now with a vengeance.”

“Reckon you’re about right, old cock,” grinned Scott; “but why rub it in, old son? Why rub it in?”

“We going to settle ’bout Dixon’s vedges?” asked Priestly slowly, “or are we going to talk about — about — something else?”

“Better ’ave it out now we’ve started on it,” put in Clark, hastily; “and if you ask me, it don’t want much talk.”

“How d’you mean, Clark?”

“Reckon you know all right and so do all of us.”

“Go on,” said Musgrave.

“It’s plain enough and don’t we know it! All had her bar one, ain’t we? Well, that’s all there is to it. It’s Nannie Larkins now or nobody.”

“So we’re going to hoist Larkins on the throne, are we?” said Stiles heavily. “Well, why not? Any other alternative?”

“‘Oo said we were?” asked Archer. “Don’t follow, do it? Not’s far ’s I can see, ’tany rate.”

“You mean, don’t you,” said Hoople quietly, “that Larkins is to be Sylvia’s husband and that *only*? To put it bluntly, we propose to deny him all the rights and privileges that we others enjoyed.”

No one replied for a moment and then Clark said coarsely, “Not to beat about the bush, Piper, that’s what it comes to. Be a stallion, he will, and that’s all.”

“That’s all very well, but you don’t put a stallion into harness.”

“Well, this one’ll have to, any old how!” grinned Dixon. “Like to see Nannie Larkins bossing this joint, I would. I *don’t* think. Blimey——”

“Let’s settle the business now,” interrupted Musgrave impatiently. “Where is Larkins?”

“Putting the kids to bed,” replied Priestly. “I’ll nip over and bring him along. S’ll I tell him what’s on the carpet?” He looked round inquiringly.

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“Better wait till he’s here,” suggested Hoople. “All agreed? Right, then. Cut along, Priestly.”

Priestly returned after about ten minutes. Sid followed him in and with an indifferent glance at the others, who were watching him closely, pulled a stool away from the group and sat down. He was half-facing the window and the evening sunlight slanting through the opening fell where he sat, while the rest of the room was in shadow. It seemed to mark with a new and startling vividness his habitual isolation. It had been left to Hoople to speak, and looking at Sid, he was suddenly aware of the incontestable fact that as far as appearance went the silent, aloof figure sitting upright on the stool need fear no comparison with any of them. The years had certainly changed him almost beyond recognition. They had changed them all. Could it be said of anyone else that the change had been for the better? But Larkins! For the better. Good Lord! Amazingly so. His glance went from Sid to the drooping senility of Stiles; to Musgrave's stumpy obesity of body, bald head and crinkled face; to Priestly's long gaunt frame and untidy iron-grey beard; to Dixon's coarse stocky maturity; to the heavy solidity of Archer's torso, the ox-like impassivity of his bronzed flat face; to the wiry animality of Clark's lean body, corded scrawny arms, and the shadow of brutishness over his battered face. His glance returned to Sid and in the moment's pause before he began to speak he seemed to see him for the first time, the spare straight figure, the bronzed lean face, the compressed line of the small mouth, the challenging eyes, the low, wide forehead and yellow hair. A fit and comely specimen. Extraordinary he'd never seemed to notice that before. The best of the bunch. There was no blinking that. And he'd got youth with him. What would he be? Thirty-seven or so. Not more. Lucky young devil. Was he aware how lucky? How lucky he was going to be? What was Sylvia now? Forty? Well, nearly. Wouldn't be so unsuitable a match. And the sooner the better. Her child-bearing days were nearly over. She hadn't minced words about that! He smiled at a sudden vivid memory and with the smile still in his eyes,

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caught and held Sid's glance. But there was no responsive smile there. He felt suddenly uneasy, irritable. Damn it! Why the devil couldn't the youngster look more—more — well, more one of themselves, less like a — like a what? He couldn't think of a simile. And then one occurred to him. Why, damn it all! he looked just like a particularly fettle some dog on guard and ready to bite.

“What d’you want?” Sid’s abrupt question startled everyone. The others looked over to Hoople inquiringly. Why didn’t he spit it out?

“We’ve got something to propose to you, Larkins,” began Hoople. “You’ve probably some notion of what it is.” He paused, but Sid made no sign of understanding and he went on, “There’s no need to beat about the bush. Bluntly, we’ve come to the end of our tether. Seventeen years ago we set out to make a new world. Well, we’ve not done badly in material ways but in the most important thing of all we’ve failed — we’ve balked, rather. Seven babies have been born to us—all boys — and six survive. If a girl baby is not born soon we’re doomed. And to be frank — er — er — Sy — er — the only woman among us may quite soon be incapable of giving us that girl. The point——”

“You’re making me boss, is that it?” interrupted Sid.

“We’re arranging for your marriage with — er — Sylvia.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?”

“Not quite. In your case. You see, Larkins, your services are quite indispensable with the youngsters. And they’ll still be required. More than ever. Get out of hand in no time, the young devils would. And so——”

“I see. I’m to be Sylvia’s husband and carry on as usual. When is this marriage coming off?”

“The sooner the better. We’re all agreed on that.”

“Glad to hear it,” quietly. “Well, wash it out.” Before the astonished silence broke he went on, “There’s nothing doing as far as I’m concerned. I’m not marrying Sylvia. Got me? Don’t want to. I like her all right but she’s not the sort of wife I want. Not keen on other folks’ leavings exactly, I’m not.”

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There was an angry outcry of, “Stow that, Nannie! That’s enough o’ that! None o’ that!” Hoople put up a protesting hand. “Not the sort of wife you *want*, Larkins? Do you know what you’re talking about? D’you realise that Sylvia——”

“Don’t interrupt, Hoople,” said Sid amazingly. “I know all about that. Not quite such a fool as you think. It’s my turn to talk now. But I don’t want to partickly. If you don’t want to hear me I’ll go back to my job. If you do, why, then, shut up and listen. Got that? Got me? You were going to say that it don’t matter about Sylvia being the sort of wife I want and that it’s what you call Hobson’s choice. I know all about that. Only I don’t

intend to choose. Got me? I'm not marrying her and that's flat. All doomed to ex — extinction, are we? And a damned good job, too. Human race blotted out? And high time it was. Bit late if you ask me. So you'll get no help from me to keep it going. Sec? Taken you seventeen years to make up your minds to give me a square deal. The deal's off. Nothing doing. Nah pooh. No need to bother about me, was there? Handy and useful and all that but not one of us. Gawd! what a crowd. The only men among you dead. You're just the leavings. A lot of makeshifts. Hope of humanity? What a hope! Remember what Digger Wells said when he was making you all skip round like a lot of scared rabbits? 'I'm top dog,' — wasn't it? Well, I'm ditto now."

"'Alf a minute! 'Alf a minute, Nannie!" broke in Clark angrily. "Shut your chops! We're not bloody well askin' you. We're tellin' you. Got me? You got to marry Sylvia, like it or lump it. And if you come any more of your sauce I'll put it across y' good and plenty. Got me? Now you buzz off back to the kids while we fix things up. We're not askin' you nothin'. Just telling you. Now beat it."

Sid rose from the stool. "You do what you like, Nobby," he said quietly. "Or try to. I've said all I've got to. As for *making* me — I *don't* think!" He walked slowly towards the door and turned with a faint grin on his face. "You can lead a horse to the water . . . Got me?" and closed the door gently behind him.

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"He's got *us!*" grumbled Archer. "Been lying low for years waiting for this, I lay."

"Gawd amighty, I'll lay him low for keeps!" shouted Clark.

"Dry up!" snapped Musgrave irritably. "He's got us in a cleft stick and he knows it. Serves us dam' well right, too. He's not had a square deal and that's plain English and it's too late now to alter it. We're finished, done, down *and* out. He holds all the cards and knows it. Pity we hedged at the last call. He might have come round if he'd been offered the same privileges as we'd all had. Dam' bad policy to say the least of it. No wonder he cut up so rough. He certainly came out of the affair with his tail up. Who wouldn't amongst us? Came out of it a dam' sight better than we did."

"Struck me while he was speaking," mumbled Stiles, "that he was a better man than any of us." His dull inert tones expressed a hopeless mental and physical lassitude.

“I agree,” said Hoople, “and in that fact lies our sole hope.”

“What’s that?” asked Musgrave, mopping the sweat from his bald head.

“Why, I fancy he’s much too good a sort to refuse if Sylvia asked him herself.”

There was a low crackle of derisive laughter.

“I’m not assuming she will,” continued Hoople calmly. “I’m quite sure, in fact, that she won’t. She must therefore be persuaded.”

“Well, you do it, Piper, old man,” grinned Scott. “She *might*. Gals might grow on blackberry bushes. You do it, old man.”

“Am I to take that as a general request?” asked Hoople suavely.

A few of the men grinned and nodded. “You might do worse, Hoople,” said Musgrave. “It’s a forlorn hope, but less forlorn than any other I can think of.”

“All right. I’ll put it to her this evening. Are we going on now with the matter of Dixon’s vedges or shall we turn it in for the day? Wash it out, then. All agreed? Good.”

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Immediately supper was over Hoople approached Sylvia and asked her if she’d come out for a stroll.

She looked at him with raised eyebrows but before she could speak he went on quietly, “I’ve a request to make to you on behalf of all of us. I’m the mouthpiece for the whole crowd this time and *not* for myself.”

Twenty minutes later they halted at the edge of one of the gardens and sat down on the grass verge.

“Well?”

“I’ll spare you a long rigmarole, Sylvia, and come to the point at once.”

“That’s an improvement on last time. Go on.”

“We want you to marry Larkins.”

“Is that all? You might credit me with a little more *nous*.”

“I’m afraid it’s not all. We want you to ask him.”

“You mean he won’t ask me himself. Is that it? Why? And no lies, please. I may take it he’s been — er — approached, shall we call it?”

Hoople nodded but said nothing.

“Go on. What happened? He refused the honour. Is that it? On what grounds? Out with it.”

“He said he didn’t want to marry anyone.”

“He said nothing of the sort. He’s not such a fool as that; nor am I to believe it. You’re asking a favour. Well, let’s have the truth first. I want to know exactly what he said.”

“As near as I can remember his words were: ‘I like her all right but she’s not the sort of wife I want.’”

“Was that all?”

“There was some perhaps pardonably——”

“Spit it out then. I’ll not ask again.”

“He said he didn’t care about other folks’ leavings--”

“Bravo, Larkins! Go on.”

“And that he’d see us damned first. He went on to say it was a damned good job we *were* doomed to extinction; that we were a set of makeshifts, the best men were dead and we were only the leavings, and if we were all to be blotted out it was long overdue. I think that was all except after a threat

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from Nobby Clark, he fired his parting shot, ‘You can lead a horse to the water . . . Got me?’ That’s really all. You see he holds all the trumps and knows it.”

“And serves you damn’ well right, don’t you think?”

“I agree.”

“And now you want me to get you out of the mess.”

“Yes. It’s pretty rotten for you, Sylvia; but what else is to be done? I’m convinced, too late, I own, he’s a damned good sort and therein lies our only hope. He wouldn’t refuse if you asked him.”

“I’m sorry. Nothing doing.”

“Don’t decide in such a hurry, Sylvia. Take the matter all round and consider it. It’s pretty foul for you and it won’t be much better afterwards. But, well, bluntly, you’ve been through worse times. It’s a queer life you’ve had to lead, we’ve had to lead.” Awkwardly, “not much love and the decent things of life. Although,” haltingly and looking away from her, “I’ve always thought you loved Seppings and he certainly loved you.” She made no reply and he went on lamely. “But this isn’t a matter of love — it’s just sheer necessity, and the hard fact is——”

“The hard fact, on the contrary, is that it *is*, ” harshly.

“What? I don’t understand.”

“No? It’s simple enough. I asked for frankness. I’ll give it in return. The hard fact is that I *do* love Larkins and for that reason refuse.”

“Good God, Sylvia! But——”

“Oh, ‘but,’ be damned!” her voice high and taut. “I do and that’s all there is to be said.”

“All right, Sylvia,” unable to deal with the situation. “We’ll go back, shall we?”

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A hastily assembled meeting in Hoople’s hut half an hour later heard the verdict. Hoople simply said, “She won’t do it.”

“Course she wouldn’t,” said Archer.

“Any reasons?” asked Musgrave.

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“None. Just a blank refusal. What’s the next move? Any suggestions?”

“It’ll have to be a bashing,” growled Clark. “He’ll come to his senses then — when he wakes up.”

Hoople shook his head. “It won’t do, Clark. We’ll have to try persuasion. And I rather fancy I can persuade him, given time.”

“But ’ow much?” grinned Dixon. “*Tempus fudgit*, they say, don’t they? We can’t afford too much blinkin’ fudgiting, don’t forget that.”

“Quite so; but we’ll manage him and without much waste of time. In fact I’ll have a quiet word with him in the morning. So let’s sleep on it.”

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But in the morning Sid was gone and *Columbus*, the motor-boat, with him. A hurried search of the stores showed he’d taken water, food and the rest of the petrol. Across the wide sandy stretch above the high-tide mark a farewell message had been written in vast scrawling letters. Sid had dredged his mind for something apt and up to the last minute had dredged up nothing. And then he had a sudden vivid recollection of that evening fifteen years ago when Hoople had said to him: “Have you read *Alice in Wonderland*?” His laughter went up to the dwindling stars and stooping, he wrote in the sand: *No little Alice in this Wonderland. Got me? Sid Larkins.*

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BOOK THREE
LORDSHIP

CHAPTER I

THE SPECKLE IN THE BLUE

AS *Columbus*, her seventeen-year-old engines wheezing, creaking and rasping, went chug-chugging out into the dawn, the still waters ahead faintly pink, wisps and eddies of thin mist curling up from her bow and falling again into her creaming wake, there began for Sid a three-weeks' voyage of new uncharted seas. He had, he reckoned, sufficient food and water for a couple of months, even if he should be unable to obtain fresh supplies, and the compressed fuel in hermetically sealed vacuum cans was, he believed, enough for several thousand miles. *Columbus* had a scheduled maximum speed of 55 m.p.h., but her oil-starved engines never touched that figure and indeed Sid did not attempt it, being content to potter along day after day at something less than a quarter of that speed.

He had no compass and at first travelled by the sun; but after a few days he ceased to bother about direction and, tying the tiller, lay down under the awning he had rigged up and surrendered himself to the happy solitude of long, drowsy, delicious hours.

Had he possessed maps and charts and the ability to make use of them he would have been no wiser, for the oceans and continents of the earth were changed completely, the shock of the globe's stoppage having shifted and broken and rearranged the strata of the crust, throwing up here, sinking there, submerging in one place immemorial hills and in another protruding old sea-beds into the startled daylight.

He came now and again to islands, some bare, rocky, desert, lonely and frightening; and others lovely and gracious with herbage and flowers and young fruiting trees. Sometimes he

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anchored *Columbus* in the shallows and waded ashore to gather fruit and get water from the streams, lying down for a while in the shade of the small trees and bushes. The only sounds were the rustling of leaves, and the ripple and brawl of running water. There was no voice of bird, beast or insect and this quiet, scarcely noticed during the day, became somehow awesome and strangely disturbing as dark fell, moving him at times to a sudden panic fear which sent him rushing headlong for *Columbus* and

which did not entirely leave him until he was far out to sea with the warm darkness all about him. After those haunted stillnesses the noisy chug of *Columbus* seemed like the hearty, welcoming greeting of a friend. While the voyage lasted he never passed a night ashore and towards the end, after his discovery that much of his fuel was perished and useless, he did not put in anywhere, but with the engine throttled down to a crawl kept *Columbus* slowly moving as if he feared that once stopped she might never start again.

Much of his time, both ashore and afloat, he spent in sleep; but he had long hours in the shadow of bushes or his awning, or uncovered under the night sky, when he lay drowsy and content and suffused with quiet happiness, passing in slow reverie the events of his life. He never allowed any thought of the future to bother him; with his peace and solitude and ineffable content there had also come a soothing drugging fatalism, shutting away all reason, all doubts, all thoughts that would have fretted and disturbed the harmony of his mind, and intensifying the joys of introspection and his power to conjure up from the past a thousand bright vivid little images.

From the infinite galleries of his mind he drew up those bright small images of scenes and people, held each watchfully for a moment and dismissed it to give place to others urgently jostling into view.

One set of images alone were dim, a little misty and uncertain: himself as a small boy of three or four running from one poky room to another in the dark little house behind the ham and beef shop. But presently these grew brighter and

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clearer and linked themselves with those of his father and mother and brothers and sisters. Always he saw his father very clearly, the sturdy body, the broad shoulders, the flushed jolly face; he saw him in a thousand guises: driving them all out to Kitt's House in the borrowed horse and trap; serving behind the counter on a busy Saturday night ladling out the faggots and pease-pudding, with a facetious comment for each customer; waving them a goodbye as they passed the shop-window on the way to school; standing in his empty shop staring furiously at the steady stream of folk going into Evans's fish-shop; drunken and flushed and obstreperous, proclaiming in the small kitchen his contempt for Evans and all his works and assuring everyone that the tide would turn and they'd all be on the highroad to fortune.

And there was Mum, laughing and singing and always busy in the early pictures, but later anxious, care-worn and quiet, and every now and again, between these two contrasting guises, there would slip up into his view a sudden image of her, white-faced and angry, sitting at the dinner table, himself and his brothers and sisters awed and silent in their places, and opposite her his father drowsy and nodding, cackling with foolish laughter and talking incomprehensible nonsense in blurred sleepy tones. One picture of his mother seemed to separate itself from all the others: she was sitting by the kitchen fire crying, all unaware of the small, unhappy watcher peering at her through the half-open staircase door.

There was John, his big brother, who had always seemed nearly a man and who had gone to sea when he was still in his early schooldays; and Milly and Alice and George and Frank and Herbie and Gran. They passed and repassed in that ceaseless pictorial review, talking and laughing and crying, saying over and over familiar things, singing familiar songs, using familiar nicknames and names of endearment or mockery, doing all the thousand and one familiar things they had done for all their years together.

And there was Medbury with its long streets, its noisy traffic, its processions and funerals and carnivals; its big houses and

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shops; its awe-striking bigwigs — the Mayor, the Vicar, the counsellors, the Captain of the Fire Brigade, the famous Mr. Francis Dashwood, designer of *The Lord Nelson* and other wonderful engines; and a small host of other great personages in frock coats and shining tall hats, with gold chains across their bellies and spats at the ends of their trouser-legs. There floated too across his retina queer little talking, laughing, shouting figures of unknown people, coming suddenly into view, uttering incomprehensible sentences and phrases and vanishing; for a brief moment they acted again the tiny scene that had stamped itself upon his memory: a small, fat, perspiring man in an alpaca coat dodged the traffic of Medbury Lower High Street and called breathlessly, “Hi! hi! George! George! Hi!” A tall, gaunt, grey-faced woman strode swiftly past the shop window, a crying child dragging on each arm, saying over and over in a fierce mutter, “Wait till I get you there.” A pretty girl in a blue silk dress on the arm of a young nob in the Rec. smiled up into his face and said, “I’m sure it wasn’t Dick.” A hunchbacked man with a livid sweating face came swiftly out of the swing doors of *The Bird in Hand* and, hurrying to the gutter, vomited

noisily, his bowler hat falling off into the filth; a horse with a broken leg lay kicking between smashed shafts and a clutter of harness just outside Evans's shop: a tall, red-faced man with a white moustache and a shiny tall hat hurried past the iron gate of the school looking straight in front of him and saying whisperingly, "Warm or not, he'll have to." Two cats, embraced, spat and snarled venomously under the clump of sunflowers in the back garden; a red-faced blowsy woman, her greying hair down her back, stood in the gutter and shouted obscenities at a pale, ragged-looking man who kept saying monotonously, "'Ow did I know 'e done it?" These and a hundred others came abruptly into view, remained a vivid moment and vanished.

Then came his Peckover days, whose people passed across his vision like grey ghosts of unhappiness; and the boys of the training-ship *Collingwood*; his mates in the Navy; and then the camp — Sylvia, Hoople, Stiles, Seppings, Brooking,

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Clark, Ferguson; the dead and the living jostling one another on and off the screen of his memory.

And as the long review ended a great content flooded over him and he lay for a while body and mind quiescent, lapped in peace and content and the sweetness of his solitude. But presently thought stirred again, centred at first about himself and then spreading outward in widening ripples till it embraced the whole of life. Here he was alone in the world, a world which had so barely escaped destruction that a mere handful of beings were left. Had that been an act of God, a purposeful act? But wasn't the earth to be destroyed by fire? He seemed to remember from his Sunday School days something about God's promises and Noah or something like that. But was there a God? Perhaps there wasn't after all. Certainly He wasn't as he used to see Him: a bearded old man in a nightshirt with wings on his shoulders and a light about His head. That, of course, was bunk. But then what could He be like? Was there one at all? That book he'd read over and over again, *The Martyrdom of Man*, seemed to say pretty straight that there wasn't. Then it was all a fluke, just chance, good luck or bad. A fluke that he'd been sent to join Q.I. for that trip; a fluke he'd been one of the survivors; a fluke he'd bolted and was now lying in the bottom of *Columbus* staring up at the stars. And Dad's life had just been a fluke and his smash and jumping into the Sair; and so had Mum's laughter and her crying and John going to

sea and himself going to Peckover and then to the training-ship and then into the Navy. All flukes, everything a fluke. Was it? Then all their trouble over a baby girl, and the future of the human race they were always talking about was all waste, no meaning to it at all, just — just — what was that he'd read in one of Hoople's books "Sands blowing willy-nilly in the wilderness." And those lines he'd learnt by heart; how did they go?

*The world rolls round forever like a mill,
It grinds out death and life and good and ill,
It has no purpose, heart or mind, or will.*

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What was the rest? Something about space and time. No, he'd forgotten it. But there was another bit:

*It grinds him some slow years of bitter breath
Then grinds him back into eternal death.*

Was that true? Or a lie? That bit about the world rolling round forever like a mill was a lie, anyhow, for if it hadn't stopped he'd not be where he was. Perhaps it was all lies and there was a God after all. And He'd made the earth and all the people on it and then killed everyone except a handful. Why? Just for a fluke? No, that wasn't the word — a what was it? — a whim! That was it. A silly sort of thing to do if He had done it. And then of course if He'd made the world He'd also made all those stars up there. Planets and suns they were. There'd been some fine stuff to read in some of those books of old Hoople's. But could anyone make a world, let alone a sun, millions of suns, wasn't it? It must be all bunk. But how did they get there, anyhow? Just a fluke? That didn't somehow seem to fit. You can't fluke something out of nothing. Or could you? Could a God? If there *was* a God. It all seemed to come back again to that. There was nothing to get hold of, nothing to bite on. Except just a few things, perhaps. Here he was, for example, in old *Columbus* jogging along slowly over the quiet water under the stars. And over there, away behind some hundred of miles, perhaps a thousand now, was the camp with Sylvia and Hoople and the boys. He'd liked the boys. No mistake about that — especially Nigel and the twins, David and Jonathan. He'd had half a mind to bring those three

along but it'd been too risky. They might have blurted it out and spoilt everything. Well, anyhow there was *something* to bite on: humanity was going under, going to be blotted out, finished with, like the birds and beasts and insects. Unless they managed to get a girl. What a hope! He had a swift vision of himself scrawling that farewell message in the sand and laughed softly. One for their knobs, all of them. Except Sylvia. He didn't want to hurt her. Come to think of

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it that was just what it was likely to do. Well, it couldn't be helped. He'd had a bellyful and didn't want any more. P'raps if she'd offered to come with him he might have agreed. But would he? No, he didn't want her like that. Wonder what it was like to be married, to sleep with a woman. Well, *they* all knew, anyhow, if he didn't. He never would now. Not much of a loss. What you've never had you never miss. What was that song Shiner used to sing? *A little of what y fancy does y' good*. Was that what it meant? Sleeping with a woman? But did he fancy it? He didn't know that he did. Anyhow, that was all over's far as he was concerned. Wonder how long he'd live? And those others. Twenty years, thirty, forty? What would he be in fifty years' time? Nearly ninety. He might live till then. But not another fifty. All be dead then. Even those boys. Nothing left alive at all on the earth. But it would still go on and on rolling round and round for ever like a mill. And who'd care then that anyone had ever lived? What was the good of it then? P'raps there wasn't any meaning in it. Wasn't meant to be. You just lived and died. But then it was worth while if you had a good time. Not that he'd had much of that. But now was different. This was something like. He didn't care if he lived to be a hundred just going on like this. What he might call the first real bit of jam since he'd been born. Well, hardly that; he'd had some fine times as a nipper, picnics and that sort of thing. And Daisy Olcott. Happy if you like he'd been then. But not much of it after. No, this was the first real bit of jam he'd had since he went to Peckover. And he was going to enjoy it. What did it matter whether there was a God or not or whether He made the earth and all the suns and planets and whether the earth rolled on for ever or stopped again for good? Well, *that* would matter. Didn't want that to happen just yet. Wanted to taste the jam a bit longer. God! it was a bit of jam and no error. A smile played about his lips, his eyes closed, he stretched his legs and then drew them up into a

more comfortable position and presently fell asleep, the smile still on his lips.

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It was late evening on the twenty-second day of that haphazard voyage that his fuel ran out. He was cruising among the islands of an archipelago which had once been the western littoral of Asia Minor and was approaching a large island, green sloped, serenely beautiful, its outline mistily soft in the sunset, when the engine sputtered, stopped, went on again, sputtered, gasped and stopped for good. He was barely a mile from the low, sandy beach, but for many long minutes after *Columbus* had ceased to shake and quiver under the impulse of the engine the distance did not seem to lessen. But presently from the masses of blurred green the young trunks of saplings began to separate themselves, the shoreward-setting loop of a current-circuit caught the boat and soon she slipped gently over the shallows and grounded on a sandy beach.

Low down and faint in the sky a crescent moon hung over the island. He lay still watching it, waiting for the swift twilight and the stars. The voyage had ended and his luck had held. Here was a happy haven and the promise of a delightful home. Well, there was no hurry; there would never again be any hurry about anything; the hours and the years were his. He wouldn't bother to go ashore just yet. He was quite content to lie there watching the silver petal, waiting for night to come. He let his thoughts wander undirected and uncontrolled, his body relaxed and pervaded with the soft thrill of physical content. A wan star pricked out beneath the lower tip of the moon. His glance moved slowly over the sky and where it paused and watched as sudden stars winked out and vanished again as it continued its sweep. And then his glance stayed and remained fixed on a speckle in the deepening blue. What was it? Something in his eye? He rubbed them and stared up again. The speckle was gone. Queer it should have been his eye. Couldn't have been dust or sand. It didn't hurt at all. Something perhaps on the — what was the word — retina, wasn't it? Sort of screen. A spot on it, perhaps. There was a blind spot of something of that sort. But then would that look like a dot in the sky? Dam' it! There it was again. A small black dot. Was it quite so small as before? Christ! was it a

bird after all this time — or — something else? He sat up. Was that a noise? A faint distant droning noise? Or a drumming in his ears? God A'mighty! It *was* a noise. Up in the sky. Up by that dot. A big dot it was now. It was getting bigger. No doubt about that. And making that drumming noise. His legs began an uncontrollable jerky quivering. Keep still, blast you! What're you scared about? Aeroplane? Don't be a bloody fool! Must be! Christ! It's coming down. Sit light! Sit tight, you bloody fool! Sit tight; what're you scared about?

He sat still, crouched forward, one hand gripping the gunwale, the other shaking upon his jerking knee. The seaplane came swooping down in a wide spiral, flattened out and alighted. He watched it moving swiftly towards him on the calm surface. His mouth and tongue went dry and rough, his breath quickened, his heart thumped against his chest. The seaplane stopped not twenty yards from him. He wanted to move, to cry out, but control of his muscles seemed to have gone from him. A head pushed up suddenly out of the cockpit and as in a flash his control returned and he cried out in startled wonder, the head turned and he stared into the face of a young woman. And as he jumped to his feet and stood up in the gently swaying boat, his arms outflung to balance himself, the woman thrust out a hand towards him and cried out hysterically, "Oh, my God, a man!" For a moment the tumbling chaos of his mind overwhelmed him so that he could neither think nor move. And then as he saw her begin to climb slowly out of the cockpit he regained a measure of mastery over himself, and stepping shakily over the side, began to walk towards her, moving with increasing difficulty as the water rose about his legs. "Stay there!" she called out shrilly. She slid down on to one of the floats and thence into the water not a dozen feet from him. And as her look held his, he was aware of a thought that was shouting in his mind, clamouring for attention: Don't let on about anything. *Don't let on about anything.*

And suddenly night came like the lowering of a blind. He

put out a hand towards the shadow that was now so close to him, faintly luminous in the star-shine. He felt cool wet fingers grasp his own, heard a voice say with a catch of the breath, "You're real, then." She seemed to be laughing and crying. He could think of nothing to say. He felt himself

confused, bowled over, utterly unable to cope with this bewildering, incredible happening. “Come ashore,” he said lamely, “come ashore, you’ll — you’ll get wet.”

“I — I — am wet, you know,” she replied, with a little tremble of laughter, her voice high and taut.

CHAPTER II

“O LOVE COULDST THOU AND I ...”

AND presently they sat and talked together upon the warm sand above the tide-mark.

The first question each asked was, “Are you alone?”

Sid nodded his head vigorously. “Reckon so; ’s far as I know.”

“For fifteen, sixteen, oh, I don’t know *how* many years! — I lost count — I’ve thought myself alone in the world, the only human being left alive. Is that how it’s been with you?”

Again Sid nodded. “But how was it — how did you get — how was it you weren’t killed like all the rest?”

“When it happened? I’ll tell you presently. You tell me your story first.”

There was no time to think. He’d have to make it up as he went along. Pity he’d not thought of something like this. But, then, who would have thought it. It fair beat everything. Nothing in old *Moby Dick* or *Trelawny* like this. He plunged abruptly into his story. “*How* I got saved is more’n I can say. I don’t know m’self. Just a fluke, I reckon, like most things. But it all came of me being on, being one of the — one of the officers of a new submarine. Q.I. she was called, and it was a trial trip with a lot of nob — er — ladies and gents aboard——”

“I remember it. Or something about it; but I was too busy and excited — but go on with your story. What were you? Commander?”

“Yes — no, I wasn’t that. Too young I was then. Only twenty. Gunnery lieutenant. Commander’s name was Brooking. Regular old——”

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“And what was yours?”

“What? My name? Sid Larkins. Lieutenant Sidney Larkins. We was seven officers and a crew of thirty-eight. Nucleus crew it was. Weren’t in commission yet. It was a — jest sort of trial trip and sort of tea party to the — the — guests just to show what a goer old Q.I. was. Sort of swanking it to all the other navies. Troop-carrier Q.I. was going to be. Carry a division or something like it and all guns and all that. Of course we didn’t have the troops aboard. Only the tea party lot. About three hundred. All the big pots in Europe nearly and wives and daughters, and so on. Idea was to make a

nice little run to Greece or Rome or somewhere like that on the surface and then nip back underwater — submerged we call it — in record time. We could do 35 submerged. My oath! We could that. Well, we left Southampton — but you haven't tol' me *your* name."

"Elma Thorssen."

"Oh?" slowly, "Elma Thorssen. Is that foreign?"

"Well, hardly," laughing; "American. But do go on."

"Right-o. Well, we left Southampton, as I was saying, at four bells, that's ten o'clock, in forenoon's watch it was, and on July third. I must tell you there'd been a lot in the papers about some bl — some scientist who said he was going to do the devil and all. Forgotten his——"

"Professor Digby Ferrars, wasn't it?"

"That was the cove. Well, I didn't know much about that sort of thing. Sailors, officers especially, haven't much time for those capers and you can bet jest then we couldn't think of anything but old Q.I. and how she was going to make everyone sit up. We had a spanking trip, I can tell you. Balls and concerts and all that at night. Of course we got invites, the officers, when we were off duty, and a high old time we had, good old cham and oysters and all that. Might have been in a posh hotel with all the — with — with the others and all that. Shut your eyes and fancy it, any old how. Sea like — like — as flat as your hand, sun shining, band playing all day and night. Fair old beano it was. We didn't forget the men, neither.

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Spliced the main brace at night. *You* know, got extra tot of rum and lashings of extra grub for them. Off our tables. Well, everything went O.K. and on the fourth we was just off an island down Rome way, south of Italy — Sicily it was called, and it must have been a'most eight bells. Why I say *must* 'a' been was because that Professor Ferrars chap had picked on mid-day July fourth to do his stunt. 'Course nobody believed him and as for us, we'd forgotten all about it. Well, there we were off Sicily near eight bells on July fourth, all the nobs nearly on deck enjoying the sunshine and the scenery and all that and the band playing like fun and everyone laughing and carrying on and *plonk!* like that, we hit something and down we went before you could wink. All those on deck swept off like — like sweeping sand off a stone and in no time we were down at the bottom 'bout three hundred fathoms the Old — old Brooking reckoned. And there was about a hundred of us shut in, buried alive like rats. No earthly. No panic of any

sort, except a bit of screamin' from some of the ladies. Crew cool and calm and the officers just smiling. Dissipperline A.i. All right smiling, of course, but we knew and so did the crew, that we were for it. All in darkness. Only torches. Of course the automatic hatches had closed and saved us being drowned like rats in a trap, but that wasn't much comfort. Not an earthly. Well, we got the crew to quarters and began to collect the passengers — what was left of 'em — and then something took hold of the old Q.I. and began to chuck her about on the bottom as if she was a marble. What it was I'll tell you in a minute, but what happened to the others after that I don't know. I got a crack on the skull and when I came to I was, you'll hardly believe it, lying on my back in the engine-room gangway, or what was left of the engine-room, and old Q.I. was high and dry ashore. On the rocks. Absolutely. High and dry on as rocky a bit of shore as I'd seen in all my voyages. And inside her, well, Gord's truth! It was something awful. Smashed bodies everywhere. Smashed up something chronic. Not a soul alive except me. And I felt about all in, too. Crack on the head, bruises and cuts all over, twisted ankle, two

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fingers broken, no end of a mess I was in. But alive, anyhow. And that's nearly all there is to it. And there I've lived ever since till about three weeks ago, when I got fed up with all — with all the sort of loneliness and living there so long and all that, so I just fuelled up old *Columbus*——”

“*Columbus?*”

“Ay. The motor-boat, there,” jerking his head towards the water, “and off I set to have a look round. 'Course it wasn't the first time. I'd done some exploring these seventeen years. Looking for anyone else left alive mostly. But couldn't do much as I'd none too much juice. But this wasn't any exploring stunt. No. Given up that long before. Knew I was the only one left alive, and that was that. Or,” smiling in the darkness, “*thought* I did. No, this was a proper bolt, a getaway. Fair fed up and sick of everything I was. So I just hopped into *Columbus* and let her rip. Tied the tiller after a bit and let her go where she wanted to. Put in on and off for fruit and water and so on. Queer how the fruit and corn and flowers and all that come back years ago. Remember it as if it was yesterday. Been prowling round one morning and ran slap into a bit of green grass poking up out of the ground. Felt like crying. That was long after the big storms, of course. It was them brought the gravel *and* the seeds, so — so — I reckoned at the time. Of

course, before then I'd lived on the stores of old Q.I. Bags of everything there was. The best grub and so on and wine and fags and everything. But after I'd seen that bit of green, it seemed no time before there was grass and weeds everywhere and corn and fruit and presently trees. But that was after the sea come back. Come back slowly but back it come and brought fish with it. I'd bags of grub all along. And soon I started a garden and got that going, used to work it like a nigger to keep from thinking about things. Like Adam I felt, and within a year or so I'd a garden of flowers and fruit and vedges that'd 'a' taken a prize at any flower show or Harves' Vestival. But as I was saying, I got fed up. Sick of it all and about three weeks ago I lit out just at daylight and let old *Columbus* rip, and rip she did till all the juice was gone.

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Ran out when I was out at sea about a mile over there and in we drifted 'bout a nour ago. And that's all I know about anything, really. Oh, but I forgot about what I was going to say about what got hold of old Q.I. and chucked her about like a marble. 'S far as I can make out and from what I read in the papers about that Professor chap and putting two and two together, what happened was this: he did his little stunt——”

“And the earth stopped and Hung everything upon its surface off into space. Is that it?”

“You're right. So you know all about it? Fair miracle it was. And how I wasn't corpsed like the rest of 'em was a bigger one. *And* you. But why wasn't you? Not in a sub — but of course you wasn't.” Suddenly guessing a part of the truth, “In that?” nodding towards the seaplane. “Was that it? But how——”

“Yes, I was in that. I'll tell you. It's even more amazing, more miraculous than your own escape. Have you ever heard of the brothers Wright — Wilbur and Orville Wright?”

Sid shook his head. “Not as I remember. What were they? Airmen?”

Elma nodded. “They were the earliest American flying men. Of course you wouldn't remember them. It was before you were born. But I thought you might have heard their names. Well, it doesn't matter. But my father, as a youth, was associated with Wilbur after his brother Orville's death and later on he devoted himself entirely to flying, designed and built his own aeroplanes — the Thorssen Flying-boat was the first to circumnavigate the globe in ten days; d'you remember that? It was about thirty years ago. No?

I don't myself, *really*; I was only three or four. Well, the Thorssen aeroplanes and flying-boats held a number of records for several years and then my father met a Professor Piccard, a Belgian, who had made several spectacular ascents in a balloon beyond the atmosphere into the stratosphere. D'you know anything of that branch of science?"

"No. We didn't have to do that sort of stuff. Navigation

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and — and — sums and the stars and so on was what we had to do. What's this stratosphere thing?"

She laughed. "We'd have to sit here a week if I went into that. But I'll have to tell you a little or you'll not be able to follow. The atmosphere extends to about seven or eight miles. It's just air, the same air as we breathe but, of course, the higher into it you go the thinner the air gets and breathing becomes difficult and then impossible. Blood runs from your nostrils and ears and eyes——"

"Cripes! I remember after I came to on the old Q.I. my nose and ears were bleeding and my eyes smarting and I couldn't see for a sort of red fog and——"

"Yes, I know. Well, that's the effect of thin, rarefied air. And so high-flying aeroplanes — but you'll know all this."

Sid nodded. "Closed in and all that and carrying oxygen. Oh, I know a bit about that."

"Yes. Well, Professor Piccard used a closed car with his balloon and, at the time he met my father, had in his last ascent reached an altitude of fifteen miles, and had discovered that the temperature rose rapidly after eight miles, that violent seasonal winds blew at fifteen miles and doubtless higher still and that there was evidence at that height of new rays that were only able to penetrate very weakly through the heaviside layer, which was supposed to be about sixty miles up from the earth's surface. He based several other startling hypotheses upon his researches but we'll not bother about them now. I've mentioned Professor Piccard because it was he who turned my father's attention to the possibilities of flying at great altitudes. And for the next six years he devoted all his inventive skill, his knowledge and his wealth to the building of high-flying aeroplanes. From the very first he contended, contrary to all accepted scientific opinion, that flight in a heavier-than-air machine would become increasingly easy as one mounted into the stratosphere; and further, that the higher one went the easier the

ascent became. Flight beyond the 400-mile extent of the stratosphere he insisted was a mere matter of technical accomplishment in building. And he very quickly began to

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demonstrate that his hypotheses were sound. But,” breaking off, “I’m afraid I’m beginning to sound just like a school teacher giving a lesson. You’ll be falling asleep.”

“Not me! It’s fine. Blimey! I could sit here a month o’ Sundays listening.”

“Well, all right. But please do stop me if I’m boring you. But I must tell you all these dull things if you’re to understand how I managed to escape.”

“‘Course you must. ’Tain’t a bit dull. Good as old *Trelawny*. No, never mind him. You go on. Could listen for a blinkin’ year. What did your Dad do?”

“Began to build high-flying aeroplanes. His first was called the *Apollo*, and made a complete circuit of the earth in thirty-six hours at a height of twenty-five miles. And the scheduled speed in ordinary air of *Apollo* was only 400 m.p.h. But *Apollo* was only a beginning. His *Hesperus* circled the globe in twelve hours at a mean height of forty miles. But these flights, he maintained, were the merest beginnings and *Hesperus* a clumsy clodhopper of a craft. And so he set out to build a ’plane — there she is,” waving a hand towards the dark shadow rising and falling on the tiny lapping waves, “or what’s left of her — that would be capable of passing up through the 400 miles extent of the stratosphere out beyond and into space, where, he was convinced, were warm equable conditions favourable to life as we know it and where such life would be found. His other prophecies, wild and fantastic nonsense they were called, dealt with the forms of such life, with cosmic and solar rays of vast power and with his fundamental conditions for lunar and inter-planetary flight. And so he built *Ad Astra* and prepared to fly her himself to convince a sceptical world that the icy deserts of outer space were the bogeys of ignorance. And then, a few weeks before the flight, he had a violent heart seizure and his flying days were over. Even then he would have gone had not someone else been available.”

“That was you!” interrupted Sid, his eyes bright in the darkness.

“Yes, of course. You can guess the rest, I expect. It’s soon

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told, although it covered seven weeks of hard work, of argument, expostulation, vehement refusal, equally vehement insistence, and, I'm afraid, tears. The tears were mine. And *all* of the profanity was not Daddy's. Twice the flight was postponed. It's queer that, isn't it? If it hadn't been and if the ascent hadn't finally been fixed upon a certain date a hundred, a thousand things would have been different. For one, I should have died seventeen years ago. Well, I got my way at last. It was so obvious that I was the only one to go that Daddy simply had to give in. It was only sheer pig-headed cussedness that delayed his surrender."

"A bit of jam, anyhow," put in Sid softly.

She went on without responding to the interruption. "The ascent began at dawn on July the Fourth. An obvious choice, of course, but how miraculously lucky! It was dawn only as far as America was concerned, of course; about ten a. m. Greenwich time. By noon, noon at Greenwich, I mean, *Ad Astra* had passed through the Heaviside layer, my altimeters were touching 120 miles and my thermometers had already passed 350 F. after having been 130° below zero. I was preparing to roll up the airtight corollium shutter and open the cockpit — a fatal proceeding according to the scientists — when, well, like you, I really can't say *what* happened. It was, in fact, something like your Q.x. being rolled over and over like a marble. I had a sensation of being picked up and flung. And I really remember nothing more very clearly until I came slowly down on to a small stretch of water that I failed to recognise. I must have dropped like a stone for over a hundred miles. There isn't much more to tell you, is there? I was slower than you were to guess what had happened, but I did tumble to the truth at last. And, well, for seventeen years I've quartered the earth looking for another human being or any——"

"How did you manage for grub and — and fuel and so on?"

"Easily enough. In planning my flight, the possibility had to be faced that at two or three hundred miles up I might go spinning round the earth at anything up to 3,000 m.p.h. and be

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unable to return, or at least only by a miracle. And so *Ad Astra* was victualled and fuelled for twelve months. Bergson's fuel, I carried. If it hadn't been for Bergson, of course, none of my father's flights would have been possible."

"I know. We carried it. I'd 'a' been anchored for keeps years ago if we hadn't. If the smash hadn't opened up most of the canisters I'd've had enough for a lifetime, a dozen lifetimes. You got much left?"

"No. About enough for a dozen hours, perhaps — twenty at the outside. I've wasted it. I've been almost out of my mind at times and then I'd set off for frenzied flights, quartering the whole earth, looking for people, for any live thing at all. I first found corn that way. And it was only just in time, for my food was giving out. I'd made it last over three years and lived on fish for another three. But I really didn't care by then. I sometimes gave *Ad Astra* full throttle and let her go and closed my eyes and half hoped we'd smash. I threw away my revolver cartridges at one time because I was beginning to wonder if shooting would be easier and less painful than crashing. I kept the revolver. I don't know why. I suppose I threw them away just for the same reason that I didn't let *Ad Astra* crash, because I felt somehow certain, despite all evidence, that I couldn't possibly be the sole survivor. It seemed too — too — oh, I hardly know *what* to call it, too wicked, too appallingly futile."

"Jest a silly fluke, like——"

"Yes, and I never did believe in flukes. I don't believe anything happens by chance."

"Not so sure m'self. I done a sight o' reading these seventeen ——"

"Of *what*? Reading? Why——"

"Reading, that's right. Had about fifty books. They were among some of the junk 't wasn't smashed right up. Don't know what I'd 'a' done without 'em at times when I was feeling like — like what you felt when you chucked away the ammo —cartridges, y'know. Yers, some queer books there were among 'em, and no error. Ever read *Moby Dick*?"

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"Did you have *Moby Dick*? Oh what luck, what a bit of jam, isn't it you call it?"

"Ay, that's it —fair bit of jam."

"Have you got it with you? I'd love——"

"Sorry. Not a blinkin' one of 'em. One of the few things I didn't think of. Skipped out in such a hurry, being so fed-up; y'know how you get sort of mad and can't stop for anything. Wish I'd brought old *Moby Dick* along now. I do that. And some of the others. Read *Trelawny's Adventures*?"

"No. What is it? A novel?"

“Don’t know,” cautiously, “so much about that; might be, p’raps; but it’s a dam’ — I beg y’ pardon--”

“What, for damn?” Laughing, “Why father swore like a trooper, worse than the mechanics, and they were pretty good. And it’s hard if the only man in the world can’t swear if he wants to, or do anything else he wants to. When I was droning round in the *Ad Astra* in the early days looking and looking for any signs of life and feeling miserable and half scared, I used to swear and swear and scream with swearing sometimes until I laughed and saved myself. But what is *Trelawny*, then, a biography?”

“Well,” still more cautiously, “in a manner of speaking, I reckon it is, but any old how, it’s about the finest cuffer you ever read. Some lad he was. God A’mighty yers. Wish I’d brought him along and *Pepys’ Diary* and *The Martyrdom of Man* and a poetry book about a city of dreadful night and all the rest. There was one or two kids’ books.” Laughing, “One called *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“What’re you laughing at? Did you think it a funny book?”

“Oh, jest thoughts. No, I couldn’t get on much with that. Ever read it?”

“Yes. And I used to think I was the only person in the world who didn’t like it. My aunt gave it me when I was twelve and was dreadfully upset and cross because I was so long getting through it. But I’d have been glad even of *Alice* these last thousand years. Did you build yourself a shack?”

“A what?”

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“A hut. Don’t you call them shacks?”

“Bet your life I did. Could’ve built a hundred out of old Q.I. Snug little place it was before I’d done with it. And not so little, neither. Nine rooms. And chairs and tables and beds and — and made the furniture m’self, y’know, jest to keep busy. That was before I got the gardenin’ itch. Yers, a proper shanty I built in the end. Fit for a millionaire.”

“I’m afraid you’ll not think much of mine.”

“*Yours!*”

“Of course. You don’t think I’ve been living in *Ad Astra* for seventeen years, do you? I used the corollium blinds and the stays and all the woodwork; and only my hands and a few spanners and a couple of knives. It looked more like a bird’s nest until about the fourth or fifth year when I found a lot of wreckage and flew *Ad Astra* backwards and forwards loaded with it until I’d a heap of stuff as big as a timber yard. And I’ve spent all

my odd time since then decorating and shoring up and putting on new rooms until now I've the oddest-looking four-roomed shack you can imagine. But you needn't try to imagine it. You'll see it presently."

"See it?"

"Why, yes. I live on this island. I thought you'd have guessed that. But you'll not be able to see it very well until daylight. My torches wore out years ago. What did you do for lights?"

"I'd bags of torches. Must've been couple of hundred at least that weren't damaged. And the batteries were Semenses, put up in steel cases and guaranteed to last for ever, until unsealed, and I rigged up a bit of plant, too, and used *Thor* as a dynamo for——"

"Thor?"

"Forgot about him. He was a caterpillar car I rigged up out of old Q.I.'s engines. Its guts used to groan and howl but it went O.K. But running short of fuel stopped all those capers and when the torches give out I used to go to bed when it got dark. But is that true? 'Bout your hut and — and — all that?"

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"Of course it is. We'll go up, shall we? And you can see my little home. We'd better haul your *Columbus* up and I'll drop *Ad Astra's* anchors and buoys. No, you can't do it. You'd not find them for one thing, and you'd certainly hurt yourself, she's full of holes and tumbling to bits in a dozen places and if you don't know the weak places you'd come through."

A quarter of an hour later they sat eating fruit and flat cakes of grey "bread" in the biggest room of the shack. "This was the first room," Elma explained, "but I pulled it down and built it larger and then expanded a side here and another there until it was its present size. The other rooms I added later. You'll laugh when you see them by daylight, but they represent years of slow work. D'you like my scones?"

"Hot stuff. But mine used to taste more like bread. Sort of knack I had, I reckon."

"Fine. You shall make the bread in future."

They both fell silent and the warm dampness of the room seemed suddenly charged with sensation. It was almost as if a dozen people had crowded into the room and were breathing and whispering.

"Do a bit o' gardenin', too, I reckon," assuming an exaggeratedly matter-of-fact tone and then putting a hand to his mouth to cover the most

obvious of counterfeit yawns.

“D’you know,” she laughed, “you’ll have to take traveller’s luck for a bed. I never expected guests and my three other rooms don’t include a bedroom. But the kitchen floor’s dry and to-morrow you must knock up a bed for yourself and get some dried grasses. Are you tired?”

“No, not really. I’d rather talk a bit. Reckon I could go on swingin’ my clapper all night.”

“I feel if I once shut my eyes I’ll open them and find it’s all a dream, all moonshine. Often when there’s been a moon I’ve sat up all night and watched it crawl over the sky just for company. There’ll be a full moon in about a week.”

“You won’t want *that* company then.”

“No. Tell me more about yourself. Where you were born and, oh, anything. Don’t stop talking or I’ll fear you’re not

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real. Tell me about your school and the Navy and your books and anything you like.”

Dawn was not far off when Sid felt his way into the kitchen and stretched himself out on the floor to sleep.

A slight noise awoke him. He turned over a little stiffly and saw Elma regarding him from the doorway. He jumped to his feet and then stood still looking at her. Her dress was similar to his own — drill shorts and a sleeveless cotton shirt. Her feet were bare, her black hair hung down in two long plaits. She was as bronzed as he was. “I’ve been for a swim,” she said. “The sea’s like warm milk, and I’ve been prying into your stores. Are you swimming? Well, don’t be too long. I’ll get breakfast.”

As he reached the door she moved aside. He looked down into her eyes and looked away and looked again and found himself responding easily to her friendly smile. As he walked down to the water there remained with him the impression of daintiness and littleness and a warm friendliness. As he walked out through the shallows there crept over him a feeling of well-being and contentment that was not wholly due to the beauty of the morning. From the confused crowd of his thoughts one suddenly stood out with arresting clearness: no other woman he had ever met had seemed little to him. The oddness of the thought halted him. It was odd, for she was, he reckoned, barely half-a-head shorter than himself, as tall anyhow, as most of the women he remembered. And yet they had never given him the

impression of littleness, daintiness. But she certainly did. Queer. His lips drew together and his brows lifted in an amused but faintly puzzled expression. He dropped on to the water, floated prone for a minute, splashing with his feet, and then dived.

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Ten days later they waded back through the shallows from their morning swim. Three mornings before they had taken it together for the first time without prearrangement or design. They had woken at the same time, laughed and chatted and

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then strolled side by side down to the beach, slipped off their clothes, splashed out to deep water, laughing and talking, and plunged in.

And now they lay down to-day in the sun. They lay facing each other, looking smilingly into each other's eyes and finding there frank admiration and a great content.

Another week went by. The pallid fragment of the moon had just risen. They stood together in the garden. There was no sound but the lap lap of the waves below them. The faint breeze carried a scent of flowers. They had been talking, for perhaps the hundredth time, of the world disaster, of their own stupendous luck, of God, of humanity, of death.

"I don't want to die," said Sid quietly. "Not now."

She made no reply and he went on thoughtfully, "Y'know, Elma, all those books I read don't mean anything. I don't mean they're all bunk. I got some fun out of 'em and a lot of facks and they started me off doing a bit of thinkin', but I mean they're somehow," slowly, as if finding words with difficulty, "they don't, they're sort of dead. Don't really mean anything at all. No, that's not it. Hardly know what I do want to say. But that chap Trelawny, now. All the things he did. Marvellous things, proper bloody and exciting things that happened to him and his fights and the girls he had and the men he killed. I thought them great and O.K. Sat over it night after night. Used to get worked up. But it's all dead, y'know, Elma. Jest old bones. I wasn't really worked up. Jest thought I was. I never felt anything. Not then. But — but——" The words to carry his passionate thought eluded him and while he groped for the revealing expression she took his

hand and at that touch he forgot his laboured search and, putting his arm about her, kissed her lips.

They came in presently from the ghostly moon and the cohorts of the stars and the soft flower-scented air and, of no set purpose, simply and naturally, as if it had been the long sweet habit of years, they lay down together in Elma's bed.

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And now the pale bud of Sid's life burst open and flowered luxuriantly. Love shattered his world to bits and in its place built for him incredible heavens of content. The larva was a forgotten dream of wretchedness, the chrysalid a dead husk. In that happy warmth the imago, fold upon fold unwrapped its wings, spreading them at last in poised and quivering loveliness.

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CHAPTER III

“OTHER EDEN DEMI-PARADISE”

FIVE years had passed. It was a hot morning of late spring. Sid sat upon the warm dry sand above the tidemark, repairing the frayed meshes of a roughly-made fishing net. He was naked except for a swathing of cloth about his loins. His lean muscular body was a dusky bronze; his bleached yellow hair was roughly cropped; a brown moustache and thick curly beard had changed his appearance almost beyond recognition. But there were more than such merely superficial alterations in him: his glance, when he occasionally looked up from his work, was no longer abashed, no longer challenging, but calm with an inner serenity, gentle with strength; the poise of his body, even as he sat relaxed, expressed the perfect balance of complete physical attunement to environment; his whole posture was one of contentment so assured, so habitual, that it was one with the smooth unnoticed rhythms of his body and happy unregarded commonplaces of the natural phenomena of the days and months and seasons.

As he worked he whistled over and over again softly and a little flatly, his favourite hymns: *Lead Kindly Light*, *Once in Royal David's City* and *Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid?*

Some twenty yards from where he sat Eve, aged four and Sally, three, splashed and shouted in the warm shallows. Beside him, her fingers busily imitating his, knelt Ruth, a fat golden-skinned, gravely-intent mite of two.

Presently he stopped, looked over to the two children splashing in the sea, smiled into Ruth's eyes and then looked away to the blue mistiness of the horizon, his thoughts following one another in easy unhurried procession. Cripes! What a great

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life! Jam on both sides. This life of happiness that went on and on. His three babes and Elly. This was life and the key of the puzzle. There wasn't a puzzle at all, come to that. God? What about Him? What did it matter, anyway? There was or there wasn't. It was all the same. Elly and him and the three nippers. Gord! How great it was! All those books he'd read. What bunk they were. Dust and old bones. They didn't matter at all. What did matter was a wife and love and kids. His kids and his own woman. Jesus!

what a bit of jam a woman was. And for nearly forty years he'd lived and known nothing about women. Nothing at all except a lot of lies and a bit of smut. Why, Gord's truth, he hadn't lived at all then. Hadn't known what it was. Scared and kow-towing, bad-tempered and wretched and lonely, his nose shoved in the muck by everybody, and then puzzling and worrying his guts out about God and the world and death and all that. 'S if that mattered. And knowing nothing about women, how pretty they were, their smooth skins like silk and their soft breasts and the look they had in their eyes, and the way a chap wanted them so's he didn't seem to want nothing else at all but to cuddle into them and hold them closer and closer until you both went off to sleep. 'Strewth! how sawney and sloppy it *sounded* when you just said it in words. And yet it wasn't sawney or sloppy but worth all the rest of the jam there was in the world. And he'd never known anything about it till he'd met Elly and she learned him, or p'raps he learned himself, never known women made all the difference between bein' alive and bein' more'n half dead. And then the kids, makin' 'em together, Gord a'mighty! That was a bit of heaven if you like; an' being Dad and Mum to them. What jam being married was — what blinkin' jam! But all married people weren't the same. P'raps he was a bit luckier'n most. Or Elly better than most women. There was Mum and Dad. Dad getting drunk and swearing and carrying on and Mum white and angry and saying cruel things. And he'd seen married folk a lot worse than them. They were the unlucky ones and no error. Missed the boat, they had, poor blighters! Or had they been like him and Elly

once and then somehow things had gone wrong? Might be. The man's fault, he reckoned. Any man who wasn't grateful for a woman was a bloody fool and deserved all he got. And here he was married to Elly and could fair eat the ground under her little feet when he'd done kissing 'em. And she as fond of him. Husband and wife. Mum and Dad and three nippers. That was the blinkin' secret of being alive and the one that made all the other puzzles about God and death and the stars and all that just bunk and twaddle. Well, he'd had his rough times. Christ a'mighty! he had that! But what were they, after all, when he'd got this. Go through a hundred times worse'n that and think nothing of it if Elly was waiting at the end. He looked up from the net to find Ruth's eyes fixed on his lips with a faintly wondering stare and realised that they had been moving to his thoughts. He caught her to him

and moved his hands slowly and caressingly over her fat brown little body. "Give us a kiss, young cokernut," he grinned. And obediently she held up her face, pursing her lips and wrinkling her eyes.

"Stop flirting with your Daddy!" said a laughing voice, and Elma picked the mite up in her arms and began the game of eating her all up, beginning with her sandy toes. Presently Elma sat down and Ruth went toddling off to join her sisters, swaying and blundering in the soft sand and chuckling as she went.

"Well, you give us a kiss, then, old darlin'," putting his arms about her, kissing her mouth and then her throat, shoulders and breasts in imitation of her game with Ruth. "Don't tell me the fish is cooked."

"Cooked, Beardy! I like your impudence. They're not on yet. What've you been talking to yourself about?"

"Blimey!" laughing. "Have I?"

"Have you! Like an old dotard. I've been standing behind you for hours listening."

"Then you didn't hear no good of yourself, I lay, nosey-parker."

"I didn't hear *anything*. Only a mumble. You're growing old, Beardy. You'll soon be doddering about on sticks."

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"Bunk. 'Bout time I gave it up, though. But it's no sign of getting old. I done it as a kid. They used to tell me it was a sign I was barmy."

"And was it?"

"I'd barmy you if you wasn't such a little 'un. But I must stop that clacking to m'self. The nippers'll be noticing it."

"*Be* noticing it! You blind old owl. They've been doing it behind you for years. You'll never give it up. Remember how you swore by all the stars you'd never do it again after-"

"I know, *I* know," grinning; "don't rub it in. I was as scared when you tol' me as if I'd done a blinkin' murder. It must have been my worrying over you and Evie. Thought you were going to die having her. That'd 'a' put paid to Sid Larkins. Wouldn't 'a' bin long joining you."

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Eve had only been about ten days old when Elma, having suckled her and put her to sleep one evening, came over to Sid and, sitting down beside

him, took one of his hands between her own and said, "Now tell me all about the others."

"The others, Elly!" astounded.

"Yes, Siddy. Sylvia and Hooper and Stiles. Who's Hooper and — and — Sylvia?"

"Hoople?"

"Well, Hoople, then. Tell me, Siddy." After a pause. "There *are* others, aren't there? I mean still alive besides us?"

"Yers. 'Suppose there are," reluctantly, almost sullenly. "But," fiercely, "I won't tell you."

"All right, darling," putting his hand against her cheek. "I don't want you to if you'd rather not."

And suddenly he dropped down beside her and, putting his head on her shoulder, said almost in tears, "I'll tell you, Elly. I'll tell you, but I won't go back. Don't ask me to, Elly. Gawd! I won't go back!"

"Of course you won't. I wouldn't let you, you silly. But I don't want to know. Really, I don't, Siddy. Just forget all about it. I don't care if there're a million others. I only want you."

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"S all right, Elly," wiping his eyes on the back of his hand, "I'll tell you everything; all the lot. I've told you lies. Hundreds of 'em. I wasn't a nofficer. I wasn't anything at all — just a——"

"Wasn't there a submarine?"

"There *was* a submarine, Elly. Old Q.I. was true enough. But I'll tell you all of it. But you won't want to go back?"

"I don't want to go anywhere unless you take me."

And when the long tale was done she took his face between her hands and kissed his hair and eyes and lips and said, laughing shakily, "As if I'd *let* you go back. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was afraid to, Elly. I'd told you all those lies and—"

"They weren't lies, you donkey, only make-ups. And you ought to have been an officer. I'd love to see you making that Brooking fellow jump round, the old pig."

"He wasn't so bad, Elly. None of them was, reelly. Not even that Delamere. They couldn't help themselves. They just had to keep on doing what they'd always done, more or less. They was all in a boat, pulling different ways and hitting out at each other, as you might say. Until they got

sort of toned down and broken in. I was the last bit of toning down, but they'd 'a' come to that if I'd waited. *Had* come to it on'y they wouldn't own up. But it's all done now. I skipped out and there you are. Don't bear them any grudge, blimey, no. If it hadn't been for my skipping out we wouldn't have met, Elly. I'd 've missed you, Elly. Gord! If I lost you now, if I lost you now, Elly," his lips trembling, "I couldn't bear it. You don't _____"

"I don't want to hear another word about them. They sound perfectly loathsome. And if ever you talk of going back I'll leave you. I will, Sid. I mean it. So there."

"Wonder what they're doing now? This very minute, Elly?"

"Something horrid. Stop thinking about them, give me a kiss and I'll go and get supper ready."

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Something horrid in fact was not very wide of the truth. The year that had passed since Sid's escape had seen the slow growth of renewed restlessness and gloom, a revival of antagonisms and jealousies, a re-birth of the old warfare over Sylvia. But before the smouldering angers and desires fired up Sylvia took control of the situation and flatly refused any further marriage. It was but a precarious control and could not last. It lasted four months and came to a violent end upon the self-same evening that Sid made his confession.

Clark forced his way into Sylvia's hut after she had gone to bed. "I've come back, missis," he said with a grim laugh, beginning to undress with clumsy fingers. "I'm the best man in this joint and we'll run it between us." He dragged down the clothes and, stooping, pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth upon hers. She struck at his face again and again and, getting her mouth free, screamed for help. "Shut up!" putting his hand over her mouth. "Shut up! I'll murder the first bastard that comes in here." He released her with a savage curse as the door burst open and Priestly came in with a stumbling rush. The big Cornishman had not come to argue or to fight. He had come to kill. He met Clark's wild charge with a smashing blow with a heavy spanner, spattering his brains and dropping him dead in his tracks.

The victor came over to the bed, the bloody spanner still in his hand. He sat down. "I'm stopping," he said hoarsely.

She did not move, staring into his face in the dim light. "Get out of this room at once."

"I'm stopping," sullenly. "I won you and I'm going to have you and Christ help anybody who tries to stop me. You're the mother o' my two boys. You been my wife and you're going to be again. For keeps this time."

"Get out of here."

"I'm stopping. Wasn't I a good——"

"Get out of here. D'you think you can get me like this? Are you going to force——"

"Let me stop, then. Tell me I can stop."

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"I shall do as I please. But you've got to get out of here. You'll get nothing if you don't. Are you going?"

"Will you take me back if——"

"I'll tell you to-morrow. Now go. And take that with you."

And the next day at noon, after the burial of Clark's body, Sylvia, having informed the camp that the likelihood of her bearing more children was extremely remote, instituted a Matriarchy with polyandry as its first law and its chief defence.

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"How much longer are you going to be over that net, Beardy?"

"'Bout ten minutes. Then I'll come and clean the fish. 'S that what you want? Thought so. Tell you what you might do: give my wool a bit of a crop at the back with the old fish-knife. Beginning to look like a picture I saw as a nipper of Moses in the Wilderness. Glad you never wanted me to cut yours. Hate short-haired women. Don't know why exactly." Gravely, "Your hair's a fair treat, Elly; fact is," screwing up his face and regarding her impishly, "you're a fair treat all over, a real bit of jam, a sight for sore eyes." Chuckling, "Reckon I'd eat you, on'y you can't eat your cake *and* have it. Now what about my wool. Hey!" as she rose to fetch the fish-knife, "what about a kiss for the old man to be going on with?" She stooped and kissed the back of his neck. "You're greedier than Sally for kissing," she laughed.

“Got a lot of leeway to make up, I have, Elly. Have to beat old Methuselah, I reckon, if I want to make it *all* up.”

She knelt down at his back on her return and began to saw gently at the thick hair with the fish-knife. “Not hurting you, am I?”

“Not you!” mumbling slightly, his head bent low over his busy fingers.

“I thought you shivered.”

“So I did,” chuckling thickly, “all down my back. Always do when you touch my neck. As good as a kiss, a’most. Must be fine to be tickled to death.”

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The thought of death suddenly invaded her mind with overwhelming dismay. If he died. What was it he’d said only a few minutes ago about her dying with Evie: ‘Wouldn’t have been long joining you.’ Life would be less than nothing at all without him. A desolate hungry wretchedness. She let herself think of him for a moment as dead and the mere thought was an icy hand at her heart. And yet there were women who played light with love, betrayed their husbands, betrayed themselves. What mad fools they were. Gambling with everything that made life lovely and desirable; for what? All the other things. Less than nothing at all. What silly little fools they were. Losing everything, just tossing it away for God knows what. Of course if they didn’t love a man. But they did. Or pretended to. Loved him and crucified him. What stupid lies. As if that were possible. What cruel faithless devils women could be. Some of them. Were they just the unlucky ones? Or were——”

“‘Ve you gone to sleep? I’ve a horrible crick in my neck.”

“You poor thing! I was wandering. But I’ve finished.”

“What, wandering?”

“Yes. And your hair.”

“Elly.”

“Yes?”

“What about a bit of wandering for us?”

“How?”

“I been thinking. About — about the camp and Hoople and — and all the rest of them.”

“Oh? And how long has all this thinking been going on?”

“Munce now. On and off. I don’t want to see *them*, as you might say, but I want them to see me. With you and the nippers. See?”

“Grand parade, is that it?”

“Sort of, I reckon. One for their knobs, any old how. Couldn’t we take a nip round in old *Ad Astra*? Remember we worked it out they’re only about eight or nine hundred miles over westwards. We’ve enough juice for three or four times that.”

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“You want to come back, then?”

“Gord a’mighty, not half! Elly, you didn’t think I wanted to stop there?” Almost frantically, “Strewth! I don’t mean that! We won’t go. Cripes! we won’t that.” Turning and taking her into his arms and holding her close, “You didn’t think that, Elly? *You* don’t want to stop?” anxiously.

“I should hate it, you silly. But we’ll go.”

“No fear we won’t. I on’y thought——”

“We will. It’ll be no end of a lark. Drop in on them, shake hands——”

“There’ll be no shaking hands, I reckon. Not likely. Gord only knows what’s been going on there these last five years. A good job you kept your revolver.”

“There’s no ammo.”

“They won’t know. But we won’t go. A bit too risky. They might — they might— Gord on’y knows what might happen.”

“Don’t be silly, Beardy. What could happen? We could skip in a brace of shakes. Not afraid of a few old men, are you?”

“Afraid! Hell! No. Not for m’self. But if anything——”

“But it won’t. *Do* let’s go. You must be dying to see what they’ve all been up to since you left. You needn’t deny it. You’d be a cabbage if you weren’t. I’m simply eaten up with curiosity myself.”

“Would you reelly like to, Elly?”

“I’d *love* to.”

“O.K., then. We’ll go.”

“But only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“We come back to our own little home.”

“Call that a condition!” with a great laugh. “Cripes! we do that! For keeps, old darlin’, for good an’ all.”

She drew him close into her arms, rubbing her face against his ragged hair and looking over to the children who in their play had followed the retreating tide and whose voices and laughter were now faint with distance.

“They’ll be shouting for dinner presently and the fish aren’t cleaned. Isn’t that net done yet, Beardy?”

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“Done! I’d *make* one time I’ve been miking here. Waiting for you. Come on now. I’m that peckish I could cat ’em raw, guts an’ all. Having hot bread, are we? That’s the ticket. Fair wolf for hot bread, I am. Fam’ly failing, old darlin’. You watch Sally’s face when she comes in and smells it.”

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And while Sid and Elma that afternoon sat discussing plans for the flight, Hoople and Musgrave some twelve hundred miles away to the W.N.W. were weeding side by side in the big community garden wherein a minimum of ten hours’ work a week was required from each member, not excluding the boys. Victor, the eldest boy, tall, broad and finely developed, was, at seventeen, a man in all but years; Richard his brother, the other son of Stiles, was now sixteen and had retained a good measure of boyishness in manners and appearance; Nobby Clark’s son Benjamin was a stocky youngster scarcely taller than Priestly’s eight-year-old twins David and Jonathan; Musgrave’s boy, Nigel, short, plump, grave and taciturn, was nine. The boys were at the moment working in their own gardens nearly a mile away. About a hundred yards from Musgrave and Hoople, Stiles, side by side with Dixon, was also weeding. Priestly, outside the stores, was sawing up small timber; Archer and Scott were in the cook-house, a few yards from which Sylvia sat in a chair mending clothes.

The years had been kind to few of them, least of all, perhaps, to Sylvia and Stiles. She looked five years older than her forty-four years; her honey-coloured hair was patched with grey, her skin tanned, parched and lined, her breasts flat, her contours shrunken into angularities, her mouth taut, her eyes dull, patient, wise, sated with experience. Stiles looked ten years older than his seventy-two. He seemed in the final stages of senility and in him mental decrepitude was fast overtaking physical. Priestly had worn badly, his long, grey beard and gaunt figure sadly belying his early fifties. Dixon, Archer and Scott might in the eyes of goodwill have passed for their ages; Musgrave certainly seemed no more than his seventy-three and

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Hoople, at sixty-eight, looked surprisingly young, having retained his bristling black hair, his alertness and the brightness of his little peering eyes.

“Phew!” gasped Musgrave. “Let’s take a ten-minutes’ spell. Wish to God I’d a cigarette! Six weeks since I had one, and it’ll be another six before there’s a chance of getting one.”

“You’ll be lucky,” grunted Hoople. “At the last inventory there were only eighty tens and sixty-three twenties left. We counted them a dozen times but couldn’t make ’em more. And now both Victor and Richard are demanding their quarterly ration.”

“I know, damn their young eyes! I told Victor they’d only be wasted on him, as he’d never acquired the taste, and — what d’you think he said?”

“Some damn cheek,” smiling.

Musgrave nodded. ‘Said I’d had my whack during a long and probably mis-spent life and it was time I gave way to the rising generation. On the tip of his tongue to say time I snuffed out; I could see that, the young blackguard.”

“H’m! I don’t know.” Shrugging his shoulders, “It’s a thinnish sort of life for them. And prospects thinner still. No more hope of posterity than a eunuch and without the eunuch’s invincible panoply against the goads of nature. We’d fret and strain and kick against the pricks if we were in these youngsters’ boots.”

“I daresay. But the others are a nice set of kids. I don’t like Victor. I fancy he’s likely to be a dangerous customer. You knew he’d asked Sylvia why he wasn’t one of her husbands. How’s that for——”

“Don’t get hot about it. The sun’s bad enough without raising your temperature with the heats of dead and gone moralities. My only surprise is it’s been so long delayed. A sort of natural unnatural request, if you like.”

“Humbug. It’s monstrous, whatever way you look at it.”

“You’re forgetting that if there’d been girls born as well as boys some of the boys would doubtless have married their half-sisters. And we’d all have drunk their health and cheered like

mad at the marriage. And think what a hullabaloo was made about Byron and Augusta. Thirty years ago *I* thought it a bit rank. Time and circumstance change all things. But I’ll agree that there’s the making of an

awkward customer in Master Victor. Perhaps we've handled him badly since Larkins left. *He* could certainly manage him."

"Pooh! he was only twelve then. He's a man now and a damned big one. He'd eat Larkins now if he opened his mouth to him."

"I'm not so sure. He told me months ago we were a mouldy crowd, his own epithet, and that Uncle Sid was the only man among us and that's why he'd skinned out — couldn't stomach us any longer. There's no doubt all die youngsters remember him affectionately. Your Nigel does, doesn't he?" Heavily, "I wish to God my poor little ape had lived, despite the rotten outlook for them. Wonder what happened to Larkins?"

"Happened? Pretty obvious. Dead, or he'd have been back years ago. Life here's pretty foul, but Jack-All-Alone is a horse of a much fouler colour."

"If he *is* all alone."

"There's no if, Hoople. We quartered fairly thoroughly an area of several thousand square miles before our fuel ran out and didn't see a vestige of anything like life. Not even death."

"I daresay. But the bit we covered, thoroughly, as you say, was only a bite out of a loaf. I'm not saying there's much grounds for my if, but there's a faint possibility."

"About as faint as Sylvia having another babe. Dixon have any success with that fake tobacco he's been maturing?"

"Depends what you call a success," grinning. "He stank us out of the card-room, burnt a hole in his tongue, to judge by his language, and set light to his pipe. I've been trying scraping the inside off bark, but it merely increases the craving and infuriates the palate. By the bye, we've rumbled Scott's boozing, or Priestly has."

"Oh," listlessly.

"Potheen. From roots of some kind, apparently. But he refuses

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to divulge. He's certainly rigged up a sort of still somewhere and makes enough poison to drink himself silly every night. Poison's the word. I told him it'd kill him in a year or less, but he only leered lickerishly and said, 'Bloo'y goo' job, too, Piper, ol' son; bloo'y fine d-d-death.' I hope he doesn't give any to the boys."

"God help him if he gives Victor a taste of it. He'd murder him and pinch the still. The boy's bad, Hoople; there's no doubt about that. He's

refused for months now to attend divine service. And considering the real comfort religion's been to all of us these last few years that's the blackest mark up against him to my mind. He's bad all through."

"Queer poor old Stiles should have fathered him," smiled Hoople. "But perhaps not so queer. Mitre to scaffold in three generations, Delamere used to say. Well, we'd better renew the losing battle with these accursed weeds. Lord, how my bones creak; I'm ageing, Musgrave, despite all flattering assurances to the contrary. What a life, hey? And after us the deluge."

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As the afternoon drew on Dixon left Stiles and as soon as he was gone the old man lowered himself down on to the grass beside a plot and sat looking away over the gardens to the sea, mumbling and muttering to himself. His mind presently slipped into incoherent musing and soon his head drooped and he slept. He was roused by David shaking his shoulder. "Uncle Stiles, Uncle Stiles, wake up. You're to come in to tea. Oh, do be quick; HI pull you up. It'll all be eaten."

"There's no hurry, Davie, no hurry. There'll be plenty left. God will provide, my boy. Not a sparrow falls; not a sparrow falls."

"What's a sparrow?" impatiently.

"What's a sparrow, eh? A sparrow. What's a sparrow?" stumbling along a pace behind the boy's eager feet. "A sparrow, eh? What's a sparrow? Never seen a sparrow, Davie. Nor a bird nor beast. Poor lad, poor lad. None of God's dumb

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creatures. All ye birds of the air praise the Lord. Amen. For the Lord God is gracious and merciful, Davie. 'Twas his great mercy saved us and His loving-kindness. For God so loved the world, so loved the world, Davie, that He gave His only begotten son, Jesus, to die upon the cross for mankind. But mankind grew evil and proud and mocked the word of God, and there were thunders and lightnings and there was a great earthquake, and every island fled away and the mountains were not found, and mankind perished from the earth. But because of His loving-kindness, Davie, he did not utterly destroy, not utterly destroy. In His great mercy, as He had saved Lot from the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah, so He saved us from the lightnings and the earthquake and the sundering sea. Saved us, Davie to be

a torch to lighten — to lighten the Gentiles. Take my hand, Davie. There's no hurry, little lad. God will provide. Not a sparrow falls, not a sparrow. The lilies how they grow. I remember, Davie, I remember," stopping and passing a shaking hand across his eyes, "a garden. Yes, a garden. It was my garden at Harborne. A lovely thing, Davie. My boys. Fine boys, they were. Fine, beautiful lads. All dead now. God took them. In His great mercy — and ——"

"Do make haste, uncle. There's jam and you know you like jam."

"Yes, jam. It's fine jam mother makes, eh, Davie? But there's no——"

But being now only a few hundred yards from the huts, Davie broke impatiently away and ran on ahead.

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Two days later, towards evening, the *Ad Astra* came swooping down out of a clear sky on to the water and taxied slowly to within a hundred yards of the beach, where the whole community drunk with wild wonder, trembling, shaking, sick with excitement, stood knee-deep in the water watching the incredible miracle.

Dixon, Victor and Hoople plunged into deeper water and swam madly towards it. As they approached, Sid's head lifted

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over the side of the cockpit. He leaned upon one arm and surveyed the swimmers with a grim smile. He saw that they did not know him. "Stop where you are!" he shouted, and as they hesitated he raised his arm and at the sight of the levelled revolver in his fist two of the swimmers dived, and coming to the surface, struck out for the beach. But Hoople trod water and sang out, "Good God! Larkins, isn't it?"

Sid bowed. "Right first time. Now splash along back and join the rest. You can see *and* hear from there and," gesturing significantly with his revolver, "you'll be safer."

And when Hoople had joined the knot of stupefied watchers on the shore, Sid turned away from them, stooped, and in another moment Elma stood by his side.

"Allow me to interduce my wife," he called, with a wide grin. "Pleased to meet you." He stooped again. "Miss Eve Larkins or Alice in Wonderland, hey, Piper?" Elma bent down and then straightened herself

with the two younger children in her arms. "Miss Sally Larkins and Miss Ruth Larkins!" bawled Sid, with a great laugh. "Here we are. Queen of the earth and three princesses. To say nothin' of the King. How-de-do all of you."

But not a sound came from the watchers on the beach. A little apart from the men stood Sylvia, holding Nigel by the hand. Her eyes went from Elma to Sid with a stare of wild unbelief.

"Nothing to say? Cripes! what a welcome! None o' that!" as Dixon and Scott moved forward. "Keep your distance and no hanky-panky. We'll have a chat in the morning. Tell them to keep off. Night prowlers 'll get hurt. Got me? No offence meant, but can't afford to take risks with the family aboard. Now about turn and hop it." As they retreated he roared after them, "No hanky-panky, mind you. I shoot on sight."

"Cripes! Elly, what a mob!" he said, as he watched the last man vanish behind the huts. "Sorry I had to bark at 'em but we can't take risks. Gord! What a broken down lot of wrecks. And Sylvia. Pretty as a painting she was once. And poor old Stilesey. What did you think of them, Elly?"

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"Worse even than I expected to find. But the little boys looked rather nice."

"They are. Fine little nippers. Not so little some of 'em," with a laugh. "Did y'notice that big curly-headed lump of a chap? Yes, that's the one. He's Victor, one of poor old Stiles's boys. Bit of a handful, I'll lay he is now. The one standing by him's his brother Richard. Decent nipper he was. And the stumpy boy with red hair's old Nobby Clark's kid. Didn't sec Nobby there. Wonder if he's dead. Well, we'll get the news to-morrow. Did y' notice that little chap hanging on to Sylvia and those two little 'uns near him. They'd be the twins, old Priestly's boys, and old Mussy's kid Nigel. Fond of 'em, I was, Elly, and no blinkin' error. Real affectionate little blighters they were. Cripes! what a life for 'em. Well, let's have some grub and then you and the nippers turn in and I'll keep my weather eye lifted. You can give me a spell about midnight. 'S a good job daylight's early."

About half an hour after darkfall Sid was startled by a faint splashing and scraping noise. He jumped to his feet and leaned over the side of the cockpit with his revolver levelled. A small black shape was crouched upon one of the floats and beside it in the water two black knobs bobbed up and

down. "Uncle Sid, Uncle Sid," whispered a pleading voice, "don't shoot us, it's only me, Nigel, and Davie and John."

A wild thought shot into Sid's mind. He laughed softly. "Cripes! not half," he whispered to himself. He let himself down upon the float and presently, having hoisted the three boys into the cockpit, climbed in after them and stood smiling into their shy, bewildered faces.

"Like to come for a ride?" he whispered.

They nodded their heads slowly one after the other.

"O.K. Shush! Sit down, then, and don' *breathe!*" He seated himself at the control column, made contact, and slowly opened the throttle. The engine sprang to life with a roar and *Ad Astra* leapt shorewards, then slewed round, taxied swiftly over the water and, as Elma woke and cried out in terror, it slowly lifted from the surface and drove swiftly upwards.

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"All Sir Garnet, Elly!" Sid shouted. "Just off for a trip!" With a great gust of laughter. "Passengers and all!"

She came over to him and sat down beside him. The camp was now a mere cluster of pin-points of light and presently was gone. Sid looked into her astonished eyes, laughed aloud and then put his lips to her ear.

"Pinched 'em," he said with a wide triumphant grin.

"But, Beardy——"

"No buts. They asked to come. Don't you see, Elly? It's just what we wanted. Or shall want one fine day. It's us'll make the new world, old darlin'. Or they will." Chuckling wildly, "I publish the banns o' marriage between Miss Evie Larkins, spinster, and Mr. David Priestly, bachelor, both of this blinkin' earth. Cripes! what a lark!"

"But, Beardy, aren't we going back?"

"Back! Not likely. We're off home, darlin', as fast as old *Ad Astra* can take us. Bit rough on Sylvia. But she's got the others. The old ship rocks a bit, doesn't she? My handlin' I reckon. Hope the juice'll last out. Will you take her for a bit? That's the ticket." He left her at the controls and went over to the side of the cockpit. She heard him cry out in alarm. He came rushing over to her. "Gord a'mighty!" he shouted, "there's someone on one of the floats." They looked questioningly into each other's eyes for a long minute and then Sid nodded and *Ad Astra* turned down her nose and slipped slowly towards the moonbright water.

Ten minutes later Sid, his mind a tumult of thoughts, hoisted Sylvia aboard. She was drenched, shivering and distraught and unable to speak. She dropped down and buried her face in her hands. *Ad Astra* drifted slowly on the water. There was no sound but that of Sylvia's low sobbing. Presently this ceased and, raising her eyes, she looked at the little group about her. Her glance went from Sid to Elma, thence to the children, staring in scared and wondering silence, and back again to Sid.

"I saw them swim out and followed them," she said dully. "What're you going to do?"

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Sid shrugged his shoulders, glanced towards Elma and then returned Sylvia's look. "Search me!" he said gruffly, pulling irritably at his beard.

"You were stealing my boys." It was a statement, but there was a faintly interrogative note in her voice.

"Well, stealin's a bit thick. They wanted to come. But if you get down to hard facks, I reckon you're about right."

"What were you going to do with them?"

"Take them back with us. No good beating about the bush. That's the great idea. Playmates for our little nippers. And later, on, why, *mates*. Got me? That's what I was going to do. And," truculently, "what's more, that's what I *am* going to do." More gently, "They'll be happier along of us. But," frowning irritably, "what we're going to do with you, damned if I know."

"Take me with you."

"What!"

"What else can you do? Let me come," turning with hands stretched appealingly to Elma. "I'm their mother, after all. And your babes need someone to look after them. Let me come." Desperately, "I'll not go back."

"Cripes!" roared Sid, his face breaking into a queer smile. "Come as Nannie, eh? Is that it?"

"If you'll let me."

Sid's eyes held Elma's for a swift second. "Righ-to," he said roughly. "That's that, then." And then suddenly, "A bit thick on them, isn't it?" jerking his thumb away behind in the direction of the camp.

"I can't help it," listlessly. "They'll manage."

"Well, all right. Still, it's a bit thick. Jesus! it's rough luck on them with no woman knocking round. We'll get a move on, Elly." He put his hand on

the throttle and then turned round once more to Sylvia. "Rough luck; it is that! What'll they do, d' y' reckon?"

"I don't care," wearily. "Let them dig their gardens."

THE END

